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CASTAWAY.

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CASTAWAY.

A Novel.

By EDMUND YATES,

AUTHOR OF 'NOBODY'S FORTUNE,' 'DR. WAINWRIGHT'S PATIENT,' 'WRECKED IN PORT,' ETC.

'Like some forlorn and desperate castaway.' *Tit. And.*

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. II.

LONDON:

CHAPMAN AND HALL, 193 PICCADILLY.

1872.

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CASTAWAY.

Book the Second.

CHAPTER I.

IN THE BUNGALOW.

Time out of mind has Springside been the chosen resort of retired Indian officers, and of those civilians who, in the happy days when the pagoda-tree was easier to shake, and more productive in its droppings than at present, were enabled, after a comparatively short number of years spent in the East, to return to England, and settle down in comfort for the remainder of their lives in more than easy

circumstances. Men of both classes, with their families, were to be found as settlers at Swelteringham, at Teemington, at Narrowgate, and at other spa-possessing places of the same class, which London physicians of repute had an interest in recommending to their patients. But neither as regards the number nor the social status of their visitors, or their residents, could any of them be compared to Springside. The waters, after all had been said, were not the real attraction of the place. They had their merits, no doubt ; they were to the full as nasty as those of any other spa, and, as another advantage, the springs were more numerous, thus affording different degrees of nastiness. Their medicinal virtues were no greater and no less than those of their rivals. Taken internally, or externally in baths which had the advantage of being larger and handsomer than those of any other place, they effected a certain number of real cures, and imbued hundreds of estimable persons with the belief, that by drinking or bathing in them a vast amount of good had been

achieved, a result which the most skilful physician would not hope to improve upon.

No, the real attraction of Springside was the society, and the inhabitants knew this, and were proud of it. What is Sweltering-ham? they would say; all very well in its way; very decent place for the country families and clodpole aristocracy of Costershire to visit, and certainly possessing one or two springs, which may or may not be good, but a mere new-fangled mushroom place just sprung into existence, and compelled to add to its attractions with the College for boys, and a Pittville, with fireworks and out-door amusements! Look at Teemington, only fit to live in during the winter, and then almost insupportable from the crowd of hunting-men who swarm in every hotel and lodging-house, and fill the air with their stable talk; look at Narrowgate, crammed with broad-shouldered men from Huddersfield, and fat women from Halifax—and then look at us! We are just the same as we were a hundred years ago; our city has not altered; it is just the same as it

was when Beau Pash was its king, and when Sheridan flirted with Miss Linley in Bilsom-street. We have races at the proper time, but we are not overdone with turfites, and we should like to catch any excursionists or 'trippers' from the manufacturing towns in our precincts. Our residents have been amongst us for generations, our visitors are people of position and family, and those retired Indians who have made Springside their home are not like the Indian settlers in the other places we have mentioned, who have made money anyhow, but Staff Officers in the Company's service, proprietors who have a star or two against their names in the books at Leadenhall-street, men who had the entrée of Government House, or were well known at the Byculla Club.

So far as their remarks about their Indian settlers were concerned, the Springside people were decidedly right. All the best men of the day, both in the military and civil service, who had either finally retired or were spending their furlough at home, made Springside

their head-quarters, and rarely left it save for a few weeks in the London season, when they established themselves in lodgings in the vicinity of the Oriental or the military clubs. The Springside Club, held in those days in the large rooms over the post-office, had amongst its members a majority of Qui-his, testy old gentlemen, who were horribly irritated by the noise made in stamping the letters underneath, or by the rattling of the mail-carts outside. The bachelors lived in hotels and boarding-houses, the married men, who were in the minority, had houses of their own, or lived in stately old lodgings, which, whatever the Springsideites might say, were now in the days of their decadence, and had quite a flavour of powder and peruke about them, reminding one of their former glories.

Unmarried, indeed, but with a house of his own, which, for want of a better name, he has called the Bungalow, and which stands in the midst of a square trim garden, invariably spoken of by him as the compound, is our old friend Captain Cleethorpe. The stout Major

of the Cheddar yeomanry lies in Cheeseborough churchyard, and Captain Cleethorpe has succeeded to his rank, but the old familiar title seems to suit him best, and he is, at Springside at all events, generally addressed by it. Five years have passed away since the occurrence of that unhappy quarrel in the billiard-room of the George, but they have effected little alteration in the Captain's appearance. His face is impressed with a few more lines, his hair is thinner, and what remains of it is a little grizzled; but his figure is still smart and soldier-like, and on horseback or on foot, he is as active as ever. See him now, on this bright evening in early autumn, standing in his dining-room, the large French windows of which open out upon the close-shaven lawn, carefully uncorking two or three bottles of prime wine, which he has just brought up from the cellar, in honour of the arrival on a visit of his old comrade, Captain Norman. See him now, with his bright eyes, his trim moustache, his long brown thorough-bred hands, well cut light gray suit, neat boots,

and unmistakable air of ease, and you will acknowledge that there is no better-looking fifty-year-old to be found in the country.

'Well, Cooke,' he says, as his tall, strapping, red-haired, soldier-servant appears at the door, 'has the Captain got everything he wanted up-stairs?'

'Yes, sir,' said the man; 'the Captain wants to know whether it is full dress to-night, sir, or not?'

'Full dress?' echoes Cleethorpe, laughing. 'Of course not; tell him there are no ladies coming, and that he and I will be alone at dinner, and that he can put on his shooting-jacket and slippers, or whatever he feels most comfortable in.'

'Right, sir,' replies Cooke, and away he goes.

'Jack will be glad of that,' thinks Captain Cleethorpe to himself when he is alone again; 'evening dress must be as bad as a suit of armour to him now. What an enormous size he has grown! But he seems just the same simple-hearted, dear old fellow that he has been ever since I have known him.'

Farther meditation is put an end to by the entrance of Captain Norman. As his old comrade had remarked, the Captain had grown enormously stout. Looking at his double chin and slow ponderous gait, one could hardly recognise in him the handsome light dragoon who made so favourable an impression when told off on escort duty, and whose good looks and splendid horsemanship, when acting as 'galloper' to the general commanding on a field-day at Aldershot, won the heart, hand, and fortune of the lady who was now his wife.

Dinner concluded, and the good wine duly honoured and attended to, the gentlemen took their cigars into the garden, where the table, with coffee, &c., had already been prepared for them.

'That's about the pattern to suit you, Jack,' said Cleethorpe, pointing to an enormous bamboo seat, half chair, half sofa; 'put your manly form into that, and make yourself comfortable.'

'Right you are,' said Captain Norman, fol-

lowing his friend's advice. 'I have seen one of these machines before, on board a P. and O. boat, when I went to see some friends off from Southampton, I think.'

'Yes,' said Cleethorpe; 'I brought it home with me from India.'

'You must have pleasant associations with India, I should think, Cleethorpe,' said Captain Norman, stretching himself lazily. 'You call your house the Bungalow, I see.'

'Well, yes,' said Cleethorpe; 'a man who has been much out there never entirely rids himself from its associations, more especially if his lines of life be cast in such a place as this. Here we have a perfect eastern colony, eat Anglo-Indian dishes, talk Anglo-Indian slang, and look out more eagerly for our fortnightly batch of the *Calcutta Englishman* than for our daily *Times*.'

'Ah,' said Captain Norman, with a yawn, 'rather dull, isn't it? Dreary old birds most of them, I should say.'

'Well, they would not be lively to you,' said Cleethorpe, laughing, 'while just in the

same way your county magnates, with their airs, and your bucolic friends, with their dissertations on mangolds and swedes, would be insupportable to me. However, we are likely to have a pleasant addition to our set; a charming place in this neighbourhood has just been bought by a man whom you know, I think; or, at all events, of whom you have heard me speak.'

'Who is that?'

'Sir Geoffry Heriot; the father of that young fellow who was in our regiment, and who had a row in the billiard-room, you recollect?'

'I recollect! I should think I did.'

'Well: I had a letter from Goole, our colonel, you know, yesterday morning, telling me that Sir Geoffry, unable to endure his solitary life any longer, had sold his place in the country, and knowing that there were sure to be many of his old comrades, and people with whose lives and tastes he had some affinity, about here, had bought a lovely little box within two miles of this, where old

General Chowder died a month ago. Goole asks me to call upon Sir Geoffry, and do the civil to him, but, beyond that, he intrusts me with a commission; he wants me to get Sir Geoffry a housekeeper.'

'A housekeeper!' echoed Captain Norman, lazily. 'Then the old boy has never married again?'

'Not he; from my recollection of what Goole told me of his married life, he has acted on the "once bit twice shy" principle.'

'And do you know any nice motherly old woman whom you could recommend to look after the General's socks, and make his jams, and rob him herself, instead of letting the tradespeople rob him?'

Cleethorpe looked at his friend in admiration. 'Certainly marriage has developed you amazingly in every way, Jack!' he said. 'It must be your domestic experience that enables you to give so accurate a description of the housekeeper's duties. I certainly do know a lady who is neither old nor motherly, but who is decidedly nice, and whom I

thought of recommending to Sir Geoffry Heriot, though I doubt whether she could fulfil all the functions which you have enumerated.'

'And who is she—a protégée of yours?'

'No, indeed, I know comparatively little of her.'

'Maid, wife, or widow?'

'A widow of the name of Pickering; her husband had held a very inferior position in some government office I believe, and when she came here after his death, some three years ago, she had an idea of seeking employment as a nursery governess, or companion to a lady, or something of that kind. But the reaction consequent upon the fatigues of nursing him in his last illness, so I understood, was too much for her; she fell ill herself, and would have died had it not been for the devoted manner in which she was nursed by a young sister, who accompanied her, and the kindness which she received from our parson and his wife.'

'And his wife!' echoed Captain Norman.

'Mrs. Pickering, then, is rather plain, I take it.'

'Another observation springing from your domestic experience,' said Cleethorpe; 'but this time you are wrong. Mrs. Pickering is a remarkably handsome woman.'

'And the parson and his wife attended to her in her illness?'

'Not merely that. During this illness they discovered that she was miserably poor; that her husband had left her no pension, no life insurance, absolutely nothing at all; that both she and her sister were quick and intelligent, and willing to do anything, no matter how laborious or how poorly paid, to earn their livelihood.'

'Poor creatures, how very creditable!' said Captain Norman, placidly sipping his glass of curaçoa.

'Well, our parson—Drage his name is, Onesiphorus Drage, queer name, isn't it?—is the son of a man who is a great gun in the City, director of banks, and all sorts of things, and, amongst others, of one of the

telegraph companies. Drage wrote up to his father, and the old man offered to have them put into the telegraph office in London, but somehow or other Mrs. Pickering had a great objection to that, and so it ended in both of them being made clerks in the branch office down here. They got on wonderfully, especially the younger one, who displayed such singular ability that, when an important vacancy occurred in the head office in London, they offered her the berth, and as the salary and chances were really good, and they found a respectable person for her to live with, Mrs. Pickering made no farther objection, and about a year ago the girl went to town, and there she remains.

'And what became of Mrs. Pickering?'

'Well, just before that, Mrs. Drage was taken ill and died, and on her death-bed she spoke to Mrs. Pickering, who had attended her throughout, and implored her to be a mother to the little girl whom she was leaving.'

'Ah, ha!' said Captain Norman, 'which

means also to be a wife to the reverend old —what you call him.'

'Not at all. The Reverend Onesiphorus, who is delicate on his chest, has been away for the last twelve months, yachting with his father in the Mediterranean, and left his flock in charge of his curate, while Mrs. Pickering, relieved of her telegraphic duties, has been living at the rectory, and educating and taking care of little Bertha.'

'And when does the parson come back?' asked Captain Norman.

'Mrs. Pickering expected him the night before last, and cleared out into her old lodging to give him possession.'

'And you propose to make Mrs. Pickering old Heriot's housekeeper?' asked Norman.

'Exactly.'

'Then you are doing a decidedly unhandsome thing, Cleethorpe, and outraging the laws of nature and three-volume novels.'

'What do you mean?'

'Why of course this parson ought to

come back full of gratitude and all that sort of thing, and ought to marry the telegraph woman, and live happy ever after.'

'Yes,' said Cleethorpe, 'perhaps so; but then you see, Jack, you don't know Mrs. Pickering.'

'No, and I don't know the parson, for the matter of that.'

'You will have that felicity presently, for I asked him to come up here this evening to hear about my proposition. No, Drage is not a young man, nor scarcely what you could call a lady-killer, but he is young enough to set the world talking if such a woman as Mrs. Pickering were to become his housekeeper; whereas with such a tough old bamboo-cane as Sir Geoffry Heriot, the veriest Mrs. Grundy in Springside, and there are some good specimens of the breed amongst them, I can tell you, could find no opportunity for scandal.'

'Hem,' said Captain Norman; 'my experience of women is, that when they give their minds to it, there is nobody and nothing

that they could not contrive to say something disagreeable about. By the way, what became of Sir Geoffry's son, after the row with that great hulking brute, whose name I forget?'

'No one ever heard anything about him,' said Cleethorpe. 'I have asked Goole more than once, but could get no tidings of the lad. He told me that he received a polite but formal acknowledgment of a letter, which he thought it his duty to write to Sir Geoffry after the row, and that when once, on the first occasion of their meeting afterwards, he was beginning to allude to the circumstances, the old man stopped him by saying, "I have no son now, sir; you will oblige me by never mentioning his name again." Goole and Sir Geoffry have met several times since then, and are, I believe, rather intimate, as indeed this letter proves, but the subject has never been touched upon by either of them.'

'It was a queer business, that funking of his, and one which I could never under-

stand, for, from the little I saw of him, the lad seemed to have plenty of pluck.'

'He was a nice boy,' said Cleethorpe. 'I think of him very often, always when his father is named; this letter brought all the circumstances fresh into my mind, and only yesterday morning I was wondering what had become of him.'

'Taken the queen's shilling, perhaps,' said Norman, 'or gone out to Australia.'

'No,' said Cleethorpe, reflectively; 'he struck me as more likely to fall on his feet in a better way than that. He was the sort of lad that people would take a fancy to, scarcely knowing why they did so.'

'By Jove!' interrupted Captain Norman, striking his fist upon the table with such violence as to make the cups and glasses ring, 'I have got it at last.'

'So had I, very nearly,' said Captain Cleethorpe, moving out of the way of some dripping coffee, 'and hot too; but what is it that you have got, Jack?'

'An idea,' said Captain Norman.

'Keep it, book it, and register it at once as "Norman's patent," or no one will ever believe you came by it honestly,' said Cleethorpe.

'Don't you be funny, but listen,' said his friend. 'Do you know what it is to be haunted by a face?'

'I did,' said Cleethorpe, half sadly. 'I have been haunted by a good many in my time.'

'Ay, those were women's,' said Norman; 'but I don't mean that, nor in that way. Do you know what it is to see a face which you recognise at once as being familiar to you, but to which you cannot put a name; which you have seen somewhere, but you cannot tell whether in real life or in a dream; which perpetually rises before you, always in the same unsatisfactory manner; the identity of which it is impossible to discover, while the more you try to link it with a personality the more vague do your thoughts grow, and the more dispirited are you as to your chances of success?'

'Yes,' said Cleethorpe. 'You have a fine poetical flow, Jack, but I know what you mean.'

'Well, I have suffered from this sort of haunting for months past,' said Norman. 'We were in town in the spring, the first time we had been there for some years, and, amongst other places, we went to the house of a Mrs. Entwistle, a kind of connection of my wife's, who is a swell in her way, and had never taken any notice of us before. She is an eccentric old woman, but very well off, they say, and goes into very good society. At her house I noticed a young man, whose face and manner seemed somehow familiar to me, though I felt that both had altered since the last time I saw him. He was talking to the guests, giving orders to the servants, and altogether making himself so much at home that I had the curiosity to inquire who he was. I learned that he was a Mr. Hardinge, a young man whom the old lady for a year or two past had adopted as her son, but whether he was related to her by blood, or

whether her adoption of him was only one of her many eccentricities, I could not gather. Having gleaned thus much from an old fellow who used to dine at the next table to me at the "Rag," and who seemed to know everything about everybody in town, I went from the staircase, where I had carried on the pumping process, back into the rooms, and found my young friend in full swing as before. This time he caught me looking at him, started, turned rapidly on his heel, and for the rest of the evening carefully avoided coming near me. I met him several times afterwards in the park, at the theatre, in society, but invariably with the same result. He shunned me, sir, regularly shunned me; made a point of turning away whenever I approached him. During the whole of that time, and very frequently since, I have endeavoured to recall to my mind where I had seen that young man before, and who he was. As you spoke it suddenly flashed upon me, and I have not the smallest doubt about it. The place where I last saw him was the inn at

Cheeseborough, and his real name is George Heriot.'

'Singular,' said Captain Cleethorpe, when his companion had finished speaking, 'very singular indeed. You are not generally very clear in these matters, Jack, but your reasoning convinces me that in the present instance you must be right. Do you imagine the boy recognised you?'

'Now I think it over I have not a doubt of it, though I cannot understand how I failed to recognise him. He has just that same cheeky kind of way that he had when he told me that it would be good for my health if he were my player at pool, and that he would give me plenty of exercise in walking after my ball.'

'Do you imagine that his father knows of his position?'

'I have no means of judging, but I should say decidedly not.'

'Did you ever try to get anything out of the old lady, Mrs. Entwistle?'

'What do you mean—money?'

'No, no,' said Cleethorpe, laughing; 'any information about the lad?'

'No, I didn't myself, but now I recollect perfectly that Lou—that's my wife—told me that on one occasion when she was having luncheon with the old lady alone, she happened to mention Sir Geoffry Heriot's name, that Mrs. Entwistle turned as white as a sheet, and asked her in a very agitated manner, if she knew the General. When she found Lou did not she became all right again; but my Lou, who is a remarkably sharp woman, at least so I think, thought it was funny altogether, and told me of it when she came home.'

'Mrs. Norman is a woman of great acuteness, I am sure,' said Cleethorpe, 'and it is a curious business altogether. However, since the old General is left solitary, and likely to remain so, the greater reason that he should be provided with a comely housekeeper who will do her duty by him without ultimate designs on his person or his purse. Mrs. Pickering is exactly the lady for the situa-

tion, and no possible objection can be made by anybody to her undertaking it unless by——'

'The Reverend Mr. Drage, sir,' said Cooke, appearing at his master's elbow.

CHAPTER II.

A REVELATION.

In an old-fashioned terrace of high houses, leading off one of the principal thoroughfares of Springside, and approached oddly enough, first by a flight of crooked steps, and then by a narrow winding path, dwelt Mrs. Pickering, of whom Captain Cleethorpe had so much to say, and who has been erst known to the readers of this story as Madge Pierrepoint.

In the three years which have elapsed since we last caught sight of her, she has materially improved in appearance. The rest and ease, the freedom from professional annoyances and private worry, the soft, bright, health-giving atmosphere, have had their invariably good effect, and her cheek is plumper, her eyes brighter, her figure

more erect, and her footstep more light, than they have been since the days of her childhood. When she rose convalescent from the illness which attacked her on her first arrival at Springside, Madge felt that a vast amount of not merely bodily, but mental disorder, which had long been hanging around her, had passed away. Gone was that fever of expectation, gone that 'restless unsatisfied longing.' No longer had she to dread the arrival of bad news, no longer to await, with trembling anxiety, the caprices of a man, who, while his affection for her had departed, still possessed the right of disposing of her time and talent to suit his own purpose.

So far at least Philip Vane had kept his word. Whether by design or accident, most probably the latter (for neither in the telegraph clerk, nor in the governess, leading a peaceful hum-drum life with her little charge, would he ever have dreamt of looking for the popular actress), he had never crossed her path. In the beneficent course of time, the early days of her married life seemed to

have almost faded out from her memory, while of the later days she thought no more than as reminiscences of an ugly dream, which, from time to time, would obtrude itself upon her, only to render her, if possible, more grateful for the peaceful quiet which she then enjoyed.

Nor was Madge's tranquil life clouded by a doubt as to the wisdom of her conduct in regard to Gerald Hardinge. Whatever might have been the feelings which had animated her during that brief season, when stung by Philip's scorn, and touched by Gerald's devotion, she had hesitated what course to pursue, they were quite gone ere the doctor pronounced her to be convalescent, and she knew herself to be once more in her right mind. Closely shutting out from mental retrospection any thought of occurrences in which Philip Vane had borne a part, she yet longed occasionally to linger over the memory of her final interview with Gerald, and even over the details of that night of agony, when she had renounced all hope of ever being

anything to him, perhaps of ever seeing him again. For by that renunciation she had done her duty, and was she not now reaping her reward? No trace of that passion, which, as she acknowledged to herself, she had entertained for him during those agonising hours of doubt, now remained! She could think of him—she did think of him often—with womanly tenderness and regard, so pure that the whole world might have known of it! She should like to see him, she should like to see his wife—for he must have a wife by this time, Madge thought—she should like him to think well of her, as an old friend; to think well of her, and as a friend, but nothing more.

It is the morning after the arrival of Captain Norman at his old friend's quarters, and Madge is seated at her little table in the window looking down upon the flagged terrace-walk, with the green railings in front. Before her is her little, old-fashioned, brass-bound writing-desk, with the blotting-book lying open upon it, and on that again a little

almanack, which she has been consulting. She has somewhat more colour in her cheeks than in the days when we first knew her; but there is the same bright, frank, earnest look in the eyes, and the long brown hair is as luxuriant as ever.

'Just three years ago,' she said to herself, referring again to the almanack, 'just three years since I fled from Wexeter, and was directed, providentially as it seems now, to this place. By that act I seem to have closed and clasped as it were the first book of my life, shutting in with it certain figures, which so far as I am concerned will, in all human probability, never appear again. There, entombed as I may say, for he is in every sense dead to me, is my husband, Philip Vane! His ghost never haunts my memory, and the only material thing I have to remind me of him is this.'

As she spoke she took up a small leather note-case from the desk and looked at it contemptuously. 'This note-case, which he must have left behind him on some occasion, and

which contains a few cards, with his club address upon them, a strip of paper containing an odd jumble of alphabetical letters, and some betting memoranda. Why do I keep these any longer, I wonder? Better destroy them and—no!' she said, putting the papers back into the case, and shutting the case itself into the desk, 'let them remain where they are; I have kept them so long that I may leave them there now, without any fear of their influencing me in favour of their late owner. To that book, too, belongs Gerald Hardinge, to whose dark blue eyes and chestnut hair this photograph—how well I recollect the day he gave it me!—does nothing like justice! And for the matter of that, to that belongs Margaret Pierrepoint, and every troubled incident of her life! What a peaceful career has Mrs. Pickering's been, and how grateful ought she to be for it!'

She was interrupted by the entrance of the servant with a letter.

'From Rose,' she said to herself, as soon as the girl had gone. 'It is only two days

ago that I heard from her. What can have induced her, usually so chary of her correspondence, to write again so soon? There can be nothing wrong with her, I trust.'

She opened the letter, and read as follows:

DEAREST MADGE,—You will be surprised to hear from me again so quickly, and will imagine, either that I have taken seriously to heart the scoldings which you have so frequently given me for being so bad a correspondent, or that something is the matter. I am glad to say that the latter is certainly not the case, and I am afraid I cannot take credit for the former; but I have a piece of news for you which I cannot resist sending to you at once. This morning, on my way to the office, whom should I meet but Mr. Gerald Hardinge, looking very well, and O, Madge, so wonderfully handsome! He was very well-dressed too, had beautiful boots and gloves, and looked what they call, quite a swell. Don't you recollect, in the

old days at Wexeter, you used to say that you thought he belonged to some good family? I am sure you would have thought so if you had seen him to-day; perhaps he has been taken up and properly recognised by them?

He hardly knew me at first, and would have passed by me without speaking, but I gave such a start. It was very rude, I know, but I could not help it, Madge; and he noticed it and half stopped, and then I spoke to him by his name. He recollected me at once, then declared I had almost grown out of knowledge. He said that I always looked so delicate at Wexeter, that he never thought I should have lived, but that there was no harm in telling me that now, as from my present appearance, there was no fear of my premature dissolution. He was very kind, and asked me all about myself, what I was doing, and where I lived—in a nice way, don't you know, Madge, without the smallest sign of *arrière pensée* about it? And he laughed when I told him

about the telegraph office, and said he remembered what active fingers I used to have in the old days, when he gave me those drawing lessons. He laughed much more when I asked him whether he was at any London theatre; he could not understand at first what I meant. When I told him that I meant as a scene-painter, he positively shouted with delight, although it was in the open street, and there were people passing all round. So then he said 'no,' and laughed again as he added that he had come into his property; and when I said that I hoped that had not made him give up painting altogether, he said, 'he did a little now and then, but only for amusement.' I have heard since, from one of our young ladies, who is very fond of art, that there were two pictures in the Exhibition this last season by Mr. Hardinge, which were very highly thought of.

Wasn't it odd, Madge, that he never once asked after you, never even mentioned your name, until I told him that Mrs. Bland was taking care of me, and then he asked where

you were. I did not tell him, Madge, as you had made me promise never to tell any one, but said, in a general sort of way, that you were not living in London, said you had left the theatrical profession, and he then asked me if you were married. I did not know what to say, Madge, for that was a contingency we had never provided for, and Mr. Hardinge looked so hard at me while he spoke, that I grew confused, and stuttered and stammered before I eventually said 'yes.' I hope I did right, Madge, but I had no time for reflection; and as I am only partially in your confidence, not knowing your reasons for representing yourself as a widow, I could only act to the best of my ability. I thought Mr. Hardinge turned rather white when I told him, and then he slightly shrugged his shoulders, and changed the subject.

He was very kind, Madge, very kind indeed, and all in such a nice way! He asked me if I were still fond of drawing, and when I told him that I had given it up, almost from want of time, and that my principal amuse-

ment was reading, he said that he had plenty of books, which he should be pleased to lend to me. 'I will send my servant with them,' he said; 'I will not come myself, so that neither Mrs. Bland nor Mrs. Grundy shall be scandalised, or, better still,' he added, 'there is a dear old lady, who is a great friend of mine—she is rather out of health just now, but as soon as she is a little better she shall call upon you and bring them to you. I should like her to know you, Rose, and I am sure she would take a fancy to you.' It was so odd to hear him call me Rose, just as he did in the old times when I was a child.

Write to me, Madge dear, and tell me what you think of all this. I have just read over what I have written, and find it does not at all give you the notion which I wished to convey of Mr. Hardinge's niceness and kindness, of the total freedom of his manner from anything like either patronage or familiarity. Without feeling that, you may think I did wrong in telling where I lived, but I am

sure that if—that you—there I cannot explain what I mean, but you will understand me.

Your loving

Rose.

P.S. Your letter just arrived about the offer of the old Indian General. I hope you intend to say 'yes.'

'Poor Rose,' murmured Madge, as she laid down the letter; 'yes, you did perfectly right, dear; you could not have done better if I had taken you wholly into my confidence, as you seem to think I ought to have done. What she told him,' continued Madge, musing, 'will be simply a corroboration of what I had stated in my letter to him, written on that eventful night. Turned white did he? Poor Gerald, I cannot understand that. He must surely have expected it. I have thought of him as married often enough; but I was his first love, I fancy, and that I suppose makes all the difference. Strange that I should hear this news of him just now, when I had been so recently thinking of him,

and when another change in my life seems imminent.'

Glancing through the letter again, she continued : 'O, yes, I perfectly understand what Rose thinks she has failed to express. Who could understand better than I the gentleness of his manner? Who could so well appreciate the real nobility of his character? I have often thought, were I in trouble or distress, there is no one to whom I would so readily appeal; now, I mean, when the lapse of time would render impossible any misinterpretation of the nature of the application. Not married! He cannot be married, or Rose would have stated so plainly in so many words. But who can this old lady be, who is going to call upon Rose, and take an interest in her?

'Well-dressed, and happy-looking, and only practising his art for his amusement! My old idea, then, the idea upon which Philip Vane used to harp so much, was the right one; Gerald's appearance in our theatrical circle at Wexeter was purely accidental. He

was well-born and well-bred, had had some quarrel with his friends, and actuated by boyish, high-spirited impulse, had run away from them, and was sowing his wild oats in a different fashion from that usually followed by young fellows of his class. Now he has returned home again, has been received by his people, and resumed his proper position. Would they,' said Madge, with a sad smile, 'would they so gladly have welcomed the return of the prodigal, if he had brought back with him as his wife a stage-player, somewhat older than himself, whose family and whose antecedents were alike unknown? I think not. If I had ever for an instant been doubtful of the wisdom of the decision which I then made, the news thus brought would have settled it! Just and merciful to us both was that decision; merciful more especially to him, though bitterly hard to bear at the time, and Gerald, as it would seem from Rose's innocent account of his behaviour at the news, even now scarcely acquiesces in it. Come in!'

These last words were spoken in answer to a knock at the door.

Enter Captain Cleethorpe, carefully dressed, as befits a man particular about his appearance, who is going to call upon a pretty woman, and with his best manner, which is frank without being careless, and familiar without being impertinent.

'Good-morning, Mrs. Pickering. Don't let me disturb you,' he adds, waving his cane jauntily, and pointing to the letter, which Madge still holds in her hand.

'You don't disturb me in the least, Captain Cleethorpe,' replied Madge; 'I have already read this letter twice through.'

'The writer ought to be proud to command so much of Mrs. Pickering's time and attention,' said Captain Cleethorpe, with old-fashioned gallantry.

'The writer is an acquaintance of yours, my sister.'

'What, pretty Miss Rose; and how is she getting on among the dials and disks, and

all the wonderful telegraphic apparatus in London?'

'She is very well, and writes in excellent spirits.'

'That's right; she was far too clever to waste her life in a dull provincial town.'

'That's scarcely complimentary to present company, is it, Captain Cleethorpe?' said Madge, with a smile.

'My dear Mrs. Pickering, your duties lay in a different sphere, one which, in my opinion, is more important and more responsible than your sister's. See how wonderfully it has all turned out! There is no other woman in the world whom Mr. Drage would have intrusted with the charge of his little child; there is no other woman, of my acquaintance, whom I would conscientiously recommend to Sir Geoffry Heriot to fill the position about which I spoke to you the other day.'

'You are very kind, Captain Cleethorpe,' said Madge.

'No, I am only very frank,' said the Cap-

tain; 'and, by the way, I want your definite reply to my proposal. I ought to write to-night, or to-morrow the latest.'

'I am afraid I must ask you to give me till to-morrow; my own feeling is strongly to say yes, but I have not yet seen Mr. Drage since his return, and I am so much indebted to him that I should not think of deciding upon such an important matter without his advice and approval.'

'Not yet seen Mr. Drage?' said Cleethorpe; 'that's strange, he was at the Bungalow last night, when we talked the matter fully out. To be sure,' he said, after a minute's consideration, 'I recollect I was the only person who spoke, and Captain Norman, a friend of mine, who is staying with me, joined in the conversation, so that I did not think the padre had any opportunity of definitely expressing his opinion.'

'He sent me a line saying that he would call upon me this morning, so that I shall be sure to see him.'

'And within the next five minutes,' said

Cleethorpe, who was standing by the window, 'for there he is, crossing the road, and just about to mount the steps; there is no mistaking his figure anywhere. I will not intrude upon you any longer, Mrs. Pickering, but will call upon you to-morrow morning, about this time, for your final decision; now adieu.'

And Captain Cleethorpe took Mrs. Pickering's hand, bent over it, and disappeared.

From the window Madge saw the meeting between her late visitor and Mr. Drage. The latter had his back towards her, but Madge noticed him make an affirmative motion with his head as the Captain pointed towards her house. Then she moved away, and shortly afterwards she heard the well-known, painfully slow footstep, and hard hacking cough, echo on the staircase outside.

Then came a knock at the door, followed immediately by Mr. Drage's entrance. A tall, thin man, Mr. Drage, with high shoulders and narrow chest. What little hair he had was light in colour, and brushed off his high

forehead. His features were clear cut and regular, but his gray eyes were deep sunken in his head, his close-shaven cheeks were hollow and wan, and he endeavoured in vain to hide with his long lean hand the nervous twitching of his thin dry lips. He was dressed in severest clerical costume, all in black, and, in lieu of neckcloth or collar, wore a clear-starched muslin band round his throat. A fine head his, of the ascetic intellectual type, wanting but the tonsure and the cowl to complete its outward resemblance to one of those zealot monks, whom Domenichino loved to paint. And assuredly in no monk was ever to be found a greater combination of selflessness, humility, and zeal, than animated the sickly frame of Onesiphorus Drage!

A bright hectic spot rose on either cheek as Madge advanced to greet him. 'I am so glad to see you back again, Mr. Drage,' she said, giving him her hand; 'you have been away a long time, but your health is much improved, I trust?'

'I am better, much better,' said Mr. Drage,

after a pause; 'but those steps outside, and the steep bank, are a little trying to me. I have breath enough left, however, dear Mrs. Pickering, to thank you for the care you have taken of little Bertha during my absence, and the wonderful improvement you have effected in her.'

They were seated by this time, she in the chair she had been occupying by the table in the window, he facing her at a little distance.

'Bertha is an apt pupil, and a very good child,' said Madge, with some little constraint, as though the subject just introduced would probably lead to discussion which she was desirous of avoiding. 'You arrived the night before last, Mr. Drage?'

'Yes, I fully intended calling on you yesterday, but I was a little overcome with fatigue after my journey; and, besides, I found a letter from Captain Cleethorpe awaiting me, a letter which affected you, and demanded a certain amount of deliberation on my part.'

Rocks ahead showing themselves again,

and now scarcely any chance of steering away from them!

'From Captain Cleethorpe?' repeated Madge; 'O, yes.'

'In it Captain Cleethorpe informed me—addressing me, he was pleased to say, and rightly, as one who had a particular interest in your welfare—that he had just submitted to you a proposition, which he thought it would be greatly for your advantage to accept. You follow me?' asked Mr. Drage, looking at her earnestly, and nervously passing his hand across his brow.

'O, yes,' said Madge, 'it is quite correct. I heard from Captain Cleethorpe some days since.'

'Exactly,' said Mr. Drage. 'I did not quite understand the details of the proposed arrangement from Captain Cleethorpe's letter, and as it was an important matter to me'—the hectic spots flushed out on his cheek again, and he had to pause a moment before he continued—'as it was an important matter to me, I thought it better to see him and talk

it out, before I came to you. Accordingly, I called upon him last night.'

'Yes,' said Madge, 'so Captain Cleethorpe told me. He was here just now.'

'Exactly. I met him outside. The proposition as I understand it, Mrs. Pickering, is, that you should go as housekeeper to some friend of Captain Cleethorpe's—a retired officer, who is about to settle in this neighbourhood?'

'That is so.'

'And you have promised to let Captain Cleethorpe know your final decision by to-night or to-morrow morning?'

'I have.'

There was a pause for a few minutes, and then Mr. Drage said, with hesitating voice and strange manner:

'It was very good of Captain Cleethorpe to ask my opinion on this question. It has given me a little time to think, and—not that I know that the blow would have been less fatal if it had come upon me unawares. See,' he said, rising to his feet, but bending

over her as he leaned across the table at which she sat—'see,' he said, speaking in a low tone, but very rapidly, 'if you go from me, I die!'

Madge started, and looked up at him in affright. 'You—you must not speak to me like that,' she said.

'And why not,' he continued, 'when what I say to you is the truth? Ever since I have been away I have been pursued with this one same idea, the hope of making you my wife. I have striven against it, fought with it, but in vain. Each simple letter written by you, telling only of the child's doings and progress, has shown me how completely you were fitted to guide her in her future life, to cheer and comfort what remains to me of mine. On every side I find, unsought, testimony to your goodness and your sweetness, in the affectionate regard with which all those with whom you are brought into contact openly speak of you. Mary, what I have to offer you is but little, indeed. My life, I know, is ebbing fast. O, that does not trouble me,'

he said, as she looked up, and involuntarily made a motion with her hand. 'I have looked forward to my release for so long, that I do not know if, even with you for my companion, I should be glad of a reprieve. But I do know that the touch of your dear hand would nerve me better to bear what must be borne; the sound of your dear voice would soothe me in the anguish which is to be endured; the knowledge that I had left you as the legitimate protector of my child would comfort me when no other human comfort could avail. This is the only power of appeal I have; may I not make it to you now?'

'No, no; again I say no!'

'May I ask why?'

She paused a moment, and then said: 'You know nothing of me, nor of my former life. Before I married I was — I was an actress.'

He started back, and clutched the table tightly.

'An actress!' he repeated. 'But you were good and virtuous, I am sure; you could

not have been otherwise. Is there no other reason?'

'Yes,' she said, very quietly, 'there is. I will tell it you now, for after what you have said to me you deserve to know it, though when I lay on my death-bed, as you and I thought when you first knew me, I would never have suffered it to pass my lips. I am no widow, but a deserted wife. My husband is alive.'

CHAPTER III.

THE GENERAL MANAGER.

Ten o'clock in the morning, and the sun shining with all his might. He has been 'at this game,' as one of the conductors of the innumerable omnibuses slowly travelling across Westminster Bridge remarks, looking upwards and shaking his head in a deprecating manner, for the last three months. During that time scarcely a drop of rain has fallen, the days have been blazing and the nights stifling, and the drought tremendous. From the country come dire rumours of burnt-up crops and dying cattle, while, in the poorer neighbourhoods of town, the water, always dealt out, owing to the admirable municipal arrangements, with a niggard hand, is now so scarce that parochial doctors are beginning to

shake their heads in alarm, and letters, advocating inquiry and sanitary reform, are cropping up in the various newspapers.

There is no mistake at all about the intensity of the heat. You can tell it from the smell of the river, now by the various passing steam-boats churned into a tide of feculent mud, now lazily ebbing, now as lazily flowing, but always filthy, loathsome, and pestiferous. You would have seen signs of its power had you been present, eight hours ago, amongst the senators, in the feeble tones and languid manner of the jaded statesman, weary of his speeches and of himself, and in the dull, despairing apathy of the few members left to listen to him. You can trace its effects in the extra sodden and pallid faces of the clerks lining the knife-boards of the City-bound omnibuses, men whose ordinarily dull and dreary lives, spent in low-ceilinged, gas-lit offices, have this year been rendered more than ordinarily horrible by the intense heat within, and the knowledge of the perpetual sunshine without, and who are almost goaded to despe-

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ration at the thought that the fine weather might break up suddenly, before their annual fortnight's holiday was obtainable.

Heat, tremendous heat, everywhere! The narrow-chested, long-ribbed horses in the cabs and omnibuses carry even less flesh than usual, and under the heavy loads which they have to drag, suffer so much as even to excite the pity of their drivers, who, in their turn, have relinquished their normal clothing, and even in straw hats and shirt-sleeves are too much influenced by the weather to beat their cattle or swear at their comrades. Heedless of the minatory glances of the policemen on duty, heedless even of the crisp mandates by which these glances are occasionally followed, the itinerant vendors of fruit and cheap effervescent drinks stop their barrows by the side of the footway, and speedily are surrounded by clamorous customers. One of these, pushing his long tray before him, and with his head turned over his shoulder, not looking where he went, strolled quietly across the road, taking no notice of the approach of an

aristocratic brougham which was bearing down upon him. The fruit in the tray was West Indian pine-apple, cut into luscious, sticky slices, and over them hung a painted canvas banner, representing several West Indians, very black and very shiny, gathering and eating the fruit in great enjoyment. The whole thing was common and vulgar, and cheap and low, and as the horse in the brougham was an aristocratic horse, he shied at it; and as the coachman was a fat, well-paid varlet, aping the manners of his superiors, he swore at it, and there was a general row, ending as usual in mob and policeman.

The latter had already assumed an appearance of portentous judicial wisdom, a condition to which his wooden cast of countenance helped him not a little, and had produced his note-book, when a voice from within the brougham told him to go to the devil, and bade the coachman drive on. At this unexpected interference with his dignity, the policeman, highly incensed, pocketed his note-book, and leaving the horse's head, walked

round to the brougham door with the intention of remonstrating; but after glancing through the window, he merely smiled a stolid smile, touched his helmet with his stiff forefinger, and motioning to the coachman, stood watching the carriage as it rolled easily away.

What the policeman saw when he looked in at the carriage window was the figure of a tall, handsome man, with bright black eyes and sound pearly teeth, which gleamed as he smiled in recognition of the official's salute, an aquiline nose, and a close-cut black beard. His appearance generally was magnificent; his dark hair, the ends of which were just beginning to be touched with gray, was surmounted by a very glossy curly-brimmed hat. He wore a white waistcoat, with a massive gold chain across it, at one end of which swung various golden charms; an open shirt-front, with plain gold studs, and a flaming red necktie, a blue frock-coat, with a velvet collar, and light trousers. He had varnished boots on his feet, and lavender kid gloves on his hands, and was smoking a cigar, a trifle under half a foot in

length. He was altogether gorgeous, and his name was Philip Vane.

Whence this transfiguration? In former days Philip Vane, even doing the best for himself, as he was always in the habit of doing, without caring who might suffer, was lean and hungry-looking. Strive as he might to disguise it, there had always been a certain look of eagerness and anxiety about his eyes; now he was stout, radiant, joyous. Gone, too, was every trace of the turf and its associations; gone were the sporting cut of the coat, the tight trousers, the spotted necktie, the horseshoe pin. The air of nonchalant languor was replaced by a brisk, sharp manner, sometimes genial, sometimes determined, but always business-like. Things of the past were the attendance at Tattersall's, the consultation of sporting oracles, the league with jockeys, touts, and tipsters; scarcely more than a reminiscence now was the apartment for 'club gentlemen;' and the Major—no longer Major—in discarding his military prefix, had dropped with it nearly all the associations of

his former life. How had this come about? Philip Vane had 'gone into the City.'

Just about that time many men went into the City, who had never previously crossed the boundary of Temple Bar. Scores of them, legions of them; princes of the blood, and peers of the realm; dignitaries of the church, and mighty men of valour, holding high positions in the army and navy; young men just beginning life, and old men from whom life had almost retired; struggling government clerks, and opulent tradesmen; artists with the pencil, and artists with the pen, seeking for a short cut to fortune, if not to fame; clergymen, who inveighed against the sin of greed from their pulpits on the Sunday, and haggled with shares during the week; and petty shop-keepers: all these went into the City, most of them in person, swarming down upon the stronghold of the brokers, and the jobbers, and the agents on 'Change; questioning, criticising, pleading, begging, buying, bargaining, chaffering; some keeping aloof themselves, and only lending their noble

names as directors of boards of management, but all with one and the same idea, the allotment of shares in the companies which were springing up by dozens daily, the immediate sale of these shares at high premium, and hence the speedy fabrication of fortune.

Daily and nightly, for the nights were far too precious to be wasted, did those on whom the concoction of these various schemes devolved, grind, and slave, and labour, in giving to their aerial fabrics a semblance of stability, and an appearance of reality. These gentry were a new brood, a species never before seen, even on the chequered surface of City life. Formerly, even in the wildest days of speculative madness, scarcely a scheme had been broached, with any reasonable hope of support, which had not something, however small, of a basis and a foundation. In those days, no matter what the nature of the transaction, men going in for City speculation took shares in a company, and held or sold them, and were rich or ruined, as the case might be. But in these latter days there sprang into ex-

istence men who made their money by simply working the lever by which the various companies were started, or 'floated' them, to use the more correct term, and who, of necessity, had no other connection with the concern (save, indeed, when they knew its value, and chose to hold by it) than the certain number of shares paid to them as part of their hire money, which they disposed of at the first convenient opportunity. 'Promoters' they were called, and the profession being a lucrative one, and requiring neither capital nor certificates of character, soon found many followers. Men who had been, as they themselves described it, 'knocking about doing nothing;' men who had been doing worse than nothing, the morally halt, maimed, and blind; men who, having been long since given over by their friends, had been morally dead for years—all these suddenly reappeared, holding commissions in the great promoting army. Some fell out of the ranks at once, and died by the wayside—the pace was too good for them; others as immediately struggled into

brevet rank, and held their own, and more than their own—other people's. Of this last number was Philip Vane.

Sharp, shrewd, and unscrupulous, ready-witted and prompt to act, with a good address, a pleasing presence, and fascinating manners, Philip Vane was just the man for a 'promoter,' and in that capacity his services were in requisition by half a dozen different persons who knew his value, at the outbreak of the mania. Experience, however, soon taught him that in such matters genius diffused is wasted, and he speedily determined to concentrate his energies on such schemes only as were submitted to him by the one man alone in whose worldly sagacity he had implicit belief. That man was Mr. Delabole.

In long-headedness and foresight, in what is now called 'financing,' Mr. Delabole had few equals, and no superior. Philip Vane was brighter and smarter, better educated, and more calculated to inspire confidence among the young, who nowadays are by no means the most ready to confide, and possess-

ing those very qualifications, the absence of which had always militated against Mr. Delabole's social success, a decent appearance and the manner of a man of the world.

Mr. Delabole had, however, that which Philip Vane had never possessed, the command of money, and a reputation, not merely for wealth, but for luck in speculating, which served his purpose wonderfully at that particular crisis. Moreover, he was sufficiently acquainted with commercial matters, and sufficiently mixed up with the City world, to be able to float any affair which he might undertake, with the aid of a few chosen friends, and without having to invoke the assistance of any of the outside world, who would afterwards have a claim to participate in the plunder. There was Parkinson, of Thavies Inn, whose door-jambs bore the inscription, 'Walters and Parkinson, solicitors,' but who was the only member of the firm, and whose real business was bill-discounting for clerks of good position in government offices, for men at the bar, to whom success

had come late in life, and who were yet financially hampered by the indiscretions or the necessities of their youth, and for other men, who were undeniably responsible. No one ever saw Parkinson's name in a legal case, but he made believe to be an attorney very hard indeed, and denied the discountership as much as possible. The desk, in the drawers and pigeon-holes of which were locked away the acceptances and promissory notes, had a few dummy rolls of paper, duly docketed and red-taped, scattered over its top, and when an intending borrower called on Mr. Parkinson, he would find that worthy inspecting one of his dummies through his double eye-glass, and apparently quite astonished at the proposition made to him. 'He had thought,' he would remark in all simplicity, 'that his visitor had looked in to consult him on some point of law, was about to intrust him with some little conveyancing matter, such as that,' lightly touching the dummy with his glasses, 'which he just had in hand. Money? He was not a money-

lender. That must be clearly understood.' And when the visitor, frightened at his virtuous aspect, was about to withdraw, Mr. Parkinson had to soften a little, and admit that he had been occasionally in the habit of obliging his friends—his friends only, mind—and that he had a few hundreds lying at his bank, and that, in point of fact, his friend could be obliged at the rate of about forty per cent. A tall, thin, fair-haired man Parkinson, with blonde whiskers and light blue eyes, of a benevolent expression, like a weak-minded fox; held in thraldom by a stout, over-dressed wife; churchwarden of his parish, and firmly believed by his vicar to be one of the most conscientious and kindest-hearted of men.

Of this clique, too, was Mr. Naseby, a dried-up, withered old gentleman, always wearing a tall hat, a high, cross-barred, clear-starched muslin cravat, with sharp-pointed collars emerging therefrom, a tightly-buttoned frock-coat, shepherd's-plaid trousers, and patent boots; a little man, with a worn-

out air, who looked like an old peer of the realm, but was a tradesman in Bond-street. There was nothing of the comic author's or artist's notion of the tradesman about Mr. Naseby; his conversation never showed the slightest solecism, his manner never betrayed the faintest trace of bad breeding; he lived in charming chambers, and had a perfect country house, belonged to a tradesmen's club, where the cooking was better and the play higher than at any other similar establishment in London, and was a softer Sybarite and a keener man of business than any of the customers whose aristocratic names were entered on his ledger. Mr. Bolckoff, a Polish Jew, and an old companion of Mr. Delabole's, who had been bankrupt twice and transported once, and had subsequently made an enormous fortune as a contractor during the American war; Mr. Poss, a tobacco manufacturer in Whitechapel; and little Mr. van Moysey, the diamond merchant of Amsterdam, assisted in forming the set.

Moneyed men these, ready with their

thousands when necessary, with implicit confidence in Delabole's generalship, and begetting a vast amount of confidence in any scheme with which their names were associated, amongst a certain class of wealthy speculative people. For the general public, however, a certain aristocratic flavouring was necessary, and Mr. Delabole took care that it should be forthcoming.

So at his beck and call, to be used as chairman or vice-chairman, or to take up humbler positions among the directors, according to the amount of strength and apparent stability with which it was necessary to endow the scheme about to be launched, were members of both Houses of the legislature, baronets, and brothers of peers with handles to their names, retired generals and admirals who had seen service, and made money in every quarter of the globe, and a host of minor dignitaries, each one of whom had some specialty rendering him worthy of his hire. For hire they all received, whether it were in the shape of salaries and emolu-

ments, of gratuitous shares allotted early, and readily converted into gold, of attendance fees and per diem allowances, or of hard cash unblushingly paid down, and as unblushingly received. In that year the Earl of Ballabrophy received more from Mr. Delabole and similar agencies, for the use of his right honourable name, than had been paid to him by his long-suffering land-steward for the previous decade ; Sir Cannock Chase, a Staffordshire baronet, who had mortgaged his ancestral hall to the proprietors of the collieries subsequently found on his estate, and who, as a great favour, was allowed by his creditors to have the right of shooting over his own manor, made in salaries, premiums, &c., a sufficient sum to help him to Baden, where he had a wonderful run of luck ; while the Honourable Pounce Dossetor, for whom Lord Glenthresher had obtained a clerkship in the Audit Office during the short spurt while his party were in power, invested the funds which he obtained for the loan of his 'honourableship' in a cab and tiger, smart

clothes and an opera-stall, and by these means won the hand and fortune of Miss Swank, the West India heiress.

By the aid of this *mélange* of Jews and Gentiles, patricians and proletarians, plutocrats and penniless peers, with always the clear intellect of Mr. Delabole as its guide, and the shrewdness and tact and worldly knowledge of Philip Vane, acting as the clamping iron which held it together, some of the most extraordinary, even of the schemes which at that time were submitted to the public, made their successful appearance. City men will remember the Trust and Loan Company of Futtyghur, empowered to act under a special concession from the Nawab Nizam of the district; the Hammersmith Havanna and Turnham-green Trabucos Association, for the cultivation of the choicest growths of tobacco in the immediate vicinity of London; the Primrose-hill People's Palace and Park, or Miniature Mont Blanc Company, which proposed to cover the Camden Town mountain with perpetual snow by aid of a

freezing apparatus, to fit it up with miniature châlets, Grands Mulets, rifts and crevasses, and for the payment of a shilling to give a visitor an opportunity of going through the whole of the Swiss excitement within the space of half an hour, with the option of being killed at the end.

These were some of the lighter achievements of the Delabole set, but there were others of far greater weight and importance; banking companies and insurance offices, projects in which philanthropy and the realisation of large percentages were to run hand in hand by the formation of docks and harbours of refuge in outlying portions of the coast; propositions for the development of new mines, or for the working of others, which, while still undeniably fertile, had been abandoned for the want of the necessary capital; a service of submarine tramways, and of mid-air balloons; improvements in gas, and the substitution of a new illuminating power. All these were taken in hand and bore fruit in their season. At the time, however, that

we again take up our acquaintance with Mr. Philip Vane, though several of these schemes were on hand, there was one which engrossed the greater part of his attention, and to which all others were subordinate, the Terra del Fuegos Silver Mining Company.

To the Terra del Fuegos undertaking Mr. Delabole had brought his best names, and his most wealthy colleagues. It was not a new affair just 'prospected,' and thrust upon the market, with the view of getting rid of the shares; some years previously it had been an undertaking in high repute amongst the mining brokers and such of their clients as did not mind a somewhat hazardous speculation, provided they obtained a high premium. The opinion of the mining engineers was that, as a speculation, the Terra del Fuegos were decidedly hazardous; the soil in which they were situated being, on the whole, of a loose and shifty nature, bad to work, and liable to fall in, and there being undoubted evidence of the presence of water springs in the immediate neighbourhood. What had been pro-

phesied at last occurred; there was a sad accident, the earth fell in upon the men, the works were suspended, and finally stopped. An attempt was made to re-open them, but the experimentalists were people without either knowledge or capital, and it failed. Since then, and until within the previous twelve months, the mines had been closed. Then the scheme was submitted to Mr. Delabole, who went through it cautiously, and finally gave his opinion as to its practicability. One of the cleverest mining engineers in England was sent out, reported favourably, and superintended the sinking of another shaft, where two or three very productive lodes were discovered. The success thus begun continued; lodes after lodes, running parallel and easily to be got at, were discovered, and the shares were at a high premium. When appealed to about them, Mr. Delabole always recommended them as the best and safest of all the investments with which he had to do; but the mining engineer, after his return

from his second visit, twelve months after the re-opening of the mine, quietly went into the market and sold his shares.

To the offices of the Terra del Fuegos, situate in the City, Philip Vane is now hastening, after his elaborate little breakfast in his West End home. He has gotten over the annoyance caused by the row with the itinerant fruiterer, and is leaning back in his brougham, placidly smoking his cigar. The chiming of the quarter past ten by Big Ben suggests to Philip Vane the consultation of his watch; finding it correct, he is sliding it back into his pocket, when, conspicuous by its new gold amongst the many dainty trifles pendent from his chain, he notices a locket which has been attached there recently. Philip Vane smiles in a pleasantly conscious manner as this trophy meets his eye, and shakes his head, and would blush if he had recollected how. Finally he opens the locket, which has two crossed horse-shoes, one in diamonds, the other in turquoise, on one side of it, and an illegible monogram on the other, and smiles

again as he looks at its contents. It is the portrait of a woman past the first bloom of her youth, but eminently handsome, with large black eyes and aquiline profile, full sensuous lips, and masses of black hair, heaped up into an eccentric coil on her head.

Philip Vane contemplated this portrait for some little time, and when he snapped the locket to, he took from his breast-pocket a Russia leather note-case, containing a few letters, and selecting one from amongst them, replaced the others, and opened this carefully. It had been opened before, apparently with a certain amount of care; the paper round the seal had been cut away, and the seal itself was intact. It bore a crest on a widow's lozenge, with the motto, Quo Fata ducunt. Philip Vane looked at this seal before he took out the contents of the envelope, held it up, so that the light might fall upon it, and examined it critically. 'I never noticed her seal before,' he said to himself. 'Quo Fata ducunt—whither the Fates lead. I suppose that's her motto; at all events, it's by no means a bad one, and

quite suitable to me. I may as well adopt it with the rest of her belongings.'

Then he took out the letter, and read it carefully through. It was a long letter, covering several sheets of thick paper, and written in a woman's hand.

Its perusal seemed quite satisfactory to Philip Vane.

'I don't think I could do better,' he muttered to himself; 'I have been tempted often before, but have deferred and deferred, waiting for the ten-strike to come off, the one big thing to turn up! I don't think I need wait any longer! I may go on dipping and dipping, and never have the chance of finding such another prize in the lucky-bag. Sixty thousand pounds, and a very handsome woman, who adores me! I don't think I could improve upon that—Quo Fata ducunt, eh? and they have led me into rather a neat thing just now, I fancy.'

He was roused from his train of thought by his brougham stopping in front of the Terra del Fuegos offices. The porter bustled

out to open the carriage door, and said to Philip Vane, in a tone which a combination of asthma and respect rendered eminently husky:

'Mr. Delabole, sir, has been asking for the general manager.'

CHAPTER IV.

THE BUSINESS OF THE BOARD.

The offices of the Terra del Fuegos Mining Company were situated at the corner of a court, wherein were located the business premises of many of those wealthy old City firms, described with such unction by the newspaper reporter as 'our merchant princes.' It was probably in deference to the taste of the younger scions of these eminent firms, that the court had always a fringe, or selvage, of a sporting character; greasy varlets hung about its portals, rubbing their shoulders against the walls, and holding in their grubby hands strings or chains, at the other extremities of which were various kinds of dogs, from the surly English bull, with his flattened nose and his curling under-hung lip, to the polite French poodle, all pink, and shorn, and curled, and

apparently quite ready for the dance. The taste of the elder denizens of the court was probably consulted by the vendors of the loquacious gray parrots and closely conferring love-birds, who also hung about the neighbourhood; while the gorgeous pictures of sunsets and moonlights, and Swiss mountain and British sea, in all of which the quantity and quality of the colour were so very much out of proportion to the size of the canvas, were publicly displayed for the entrapment of old ladies and gentlemen who had been drawing their dividends at the Bank, or country cousins brought to stare at the Royal Exchange.

It was part of Mr. Delabole's plan that the offices of the Terra del Fuegos Company should be in this particular position, situated in the very midst of the wealth and power of the City; but it was equally part of his plan that in themselves they should be plain and simple, and by no means loud, glaring, or new. The name of the company was inscribed on the wire blind in the lower room, in small tasteful letters; the brass plates on the door-

jambs were simple and unpretending; the hall-porter was dressed in sober brown, a little relieved by red piping; and the messengers looked like well-to-do waiters.

'We don't want any fuss or flurry,' said Mr. Delabole, speaking on this point; 'we don't beat drums or blow trumpets, like mountebanks vending their nostrums in the market-place; we don't combine life insurance with loans, like the Friendly Grasp opposite, or tout for banking business like the Deferred Depositors, a little lower down. We are a mining company, and not all the brass plates or polished furniture in the world would increase by one the yield of oitavas, or the value of the lode. No, the quieter we keep in that way the better.' Thus Mr. Delabole to his brother directors, adding, 'The real publicity which we want is to be gained by advertising, by squaring newspaper proprietors and City correspondents, and fellows who go about and talk and earwig people. Put aside a certain sum for them, and go it!' And they went it accordingly.

After dismissing his brougham, Philip Vane, preceded by the porter, who opened the doors for him, passed through the outer public offices, where a dozen clerks, some old, some young, but all of most respectable appearance, were bending over their desks, and entered an inner room, the glass half of the door of which bore the word 'Private.' A large comfortable room, lit by a skylight, the big square writing-table covered with documents, tape-tied, docketed, and neatly arranged; with several easy-chairs about, and a high standing desk in one corner. One of the walls was covered by a frame of maps, and over the mantelpiece hung a large and admirably executed photograph of the central shaft of the Terra del Fuegos mine, with smaller ones representing other portions of the works, natives in their mining-dresses, the English engineers standing in a row, looking preternaturally grim and solemn, and very bulgy about the boots and hands, &c. In the corner of the room stood a large square glass case, containing various specimens of the ore, each

duly labelled, and standing opposite to this glass case, and apparently deeply interested in the examination of its contents, Philip Vane found Mr. Delabole.

That gentleman turned at the sound of the opening door and nodded to his friend.

'You here already?' said Philip Vane; 'there must be something particularly attractive in the worm line hereabouts, to bring such a bird from his nest so early.'

'No,' said Mr. Delabole, 'my early birdiness is rather due to the fact that I was feverish and could not rest.'

'Too much claret last night?' asked Vane.

'No,' said Mr. Delabole, 'I think not, though I took a good deal of it, knowing the tap, as I have done for many years. I rather imagine that this confounded hot weather is knocking me up; I must run away somewhere and get change of air.'

'Not yet,' said Philip Vane sharply, looking steadily at him. 'You must not go yet.'

'Must not?' said Mr. Delabole, raising his eyebrows.

'Must not,' repeated Vane. 'There are, as you know, two or three affairs connected with this place now in the balance, and until they are settled you must not go.'

'What a man of business he has become!' murmured Mr. Delabole, looking at his companion admiringly through his half-shut eyes. 'What energy, what industry, what determination! And all for his friends too. No thought of himself in any one of his proceedings.' Then louder: 'You are perfectly right, my good fellow, I should not dream of leaving London until these matters were settled.'

'Have you taken any farther steps as regards Irving?'

'My dear fellow, I am always taking steps as regards everybody! That is the one, and only one defect, my dear Philip, in you. Utterly unaccustomed to business during the early days of your life, you have now taken to it with an energy and relish marvellous to behold; but your ideas on one point are

a little antiquated. You don't understand progress being made except in the regular routine; you transact your business with ledgers and daybooks, and leaden inkstands, and long quill-pens, and very respectable, but confoundedly dull people for your clerks. Now I do my business in evening dress, at the Opera, in society, over a filet, a glass of claret, a woman's fan! And yet I will back myself to make more way and get more influence after my fashion than you after yours.'

'Very likely,' said Philip Vane grimly. 'I am sorry my way of doing business does not please you; but it can be altered of course. We need not keep any accounts at all; or such as we are compelled to have can be kept by comic clerks, chirping music-hall ditties over little account-books, gilt-edged and bound in Russia leather. Would that suit you?'

'No,' said Mr. Delabole quietly, 'it would not, nor does it ever suit me to be sneered at by—any one! Let us drop the subject.'

Philip Vane saw that his companion was

annoyed. There was scarcely another man in the world whom, prompted by his natural spirit of insolence, he would have hesitated to affront, but he could not afford to quarrel with Mr. Delabole, and he knew it, so he changed his tone and manner in an instant.

'I fancy that the hot weather has had something to do with all our tempers,' he said, with a half-laugh. 'I know that I am unstrung and irritable to a degree, so I went for a long ride round the suburbs last night, to try if I could not get some freshness into me.'

'You were alone?' asked Mr. Delabole, looking at him steadily.

'Quite alone.'

'I am glad of it,' said Mr. Delabole. 'It would not do to be playing any pranks just now. I expected to find you on duty in Harley-street.'

'No, I was asked, but on the whole I thought it better not to go. It is a little too soon to *afficher* the affair so publicly. Don't you agree with me?'

'Are you perfectly certain of your position?'

'Perfectly.'

'You proposed yesterday as you intended?'

'I did.'

'And she accepted you?'

'She did.'

'Any tangible proofs?'

'This,' said Philip Vane, uncoupling the locket from his chain, and placing it in his friend's hand, 'this, which she gave me yesterday.'

'That's not much,' said Mr. Delabole, unconsciously, and from mere force of habit, weighing the trinket in his hand. 'Nothing else?'

'This,' said Philip Vane, taking his note-case from his breast-pocket, and holding up the letter which he had been reading in his brougham; 'this, which she wrote me last night.'

'Ah!' said Mr. Delabole, drawing his breath, 'that looks better. Does she commit herself?'

'Unquestionably.'

'That will do,' said Mr. Delabole. 'I congratulate you. It is your modesty, I suppose, that prevented you dining there last night,' he added, with a grin.

'What some people would call modesty, I suppose, but what I call tact,' said Philip Vane. 'I thought it better not. Had you a pleasant party?'

'Very pleasant,' said Mr. Delabole; 'Mrs. Bendixen herself looked splendidly handsome, and was in capital form, no doubt the result of her morning's interview with you. Then there were Poss and his wife, both very nervous, looking round to see how other people behaved and ate, and evidently disappointed at there being so little fried fish; a good-looking woman, whose name I could not catch, a grass widow, with a husband in India, or one of those convenient places; old Lord McTaggart, who came screwing up to me after dinner, and asked me to put him on to something good, he didn't care what; Asprey, and a deuced good-looking young

fellow, whose name I have been trying to recollect, but can't. Queer name, too, high-sounding, romantic, like one of those odd combinations of aristocratic family names, used by the theatrical people who advertise in the *Haresfoot* for engagements.'

'I never see the *Haresfoot*,' said Philip Vane.

'Don't you?' said Mr. Delabole. 'It is a deuced amusing paper; but you never did take any interest in theatrical matters,' he added, looking at his companion closely. 'However, Asprey got talking to me about this young fellow after dinner. It appears that he is the adopted son of some old lady with an immense lot of money, all of which, when the old lady dies, it is supposed, he will inherit. The old lady is very ill just now, and Asprey is attending her.'

'Indeed,' said Philip Vane. 'If Asprey is attending her that looks well for the youth's chances of speedy inheritance, particularly if the Doctor is interested in the matter.'

'The Doctor is a very wide-awake customer, as you know perfectly well, my dear Philip; and, as you know equally well, believes in us, and is in heavily with us. He thinks it very advisable that we should get hold of this young—Gerald Hardinge; that's the fellow's name.'

'Gerald Hardinge!' repeated Vane.

'Yes,' said Delabole quickly. 'Do you know him?'

'The name somehow seems familiar to me,' said Vane, pondering. Then, after an instant's pause, 'No, it cannot be the same.'

'Why not?' asked Mr. Delabole. 'Who was your friend?'

'He was no friend of mine,' said Vane; 'I never saw him. I think I recollect the name as scene-painter, or something of that sort, in the same theatrical company with that Miss Pierrepoint, the girl, you may remember, I spoke to you about, who I thought would suit your friend Wuff, but who would not go.'

'I recollect,' said Mr. Delabole, 'there

was a good deal of promise about that girl. Did you ever hear what became of her?'

'Not I,' said Philip; 'I had no interest in her, and only thought to do Wuff a turn. She's married, I suppose, or dead.'

'Ah,' said Delabole, 'pretty much the same thing in her profession. I am not at all sure that this is not your man; there was some talk about his painting, I recollect, and Asprey said his was rather a romantic story. He promised to come here this morning and tell me all about it.'

'You are rather weak in your pronouns, my dear Delabole,' said Philip Vane. 'Who is "he"—the Doctor or the dupe?'

'You are rather strong in your language, my dear Vane,' retorted Delabole. 'Dupe is an awkward word to use, even amongst friends; it is the Doctor, Doctor Asprey, whom I expect here this morning.'

'I am glad he is coming,' said Philip Vane, with apparent heartiness, anxious to conciliate his companion; 'a capital fellow Asprey, and one who has been of much ser-

vice to us. He is such an excellent— There, I was going to use another word that might possibly offend your susceptibilities. I was going to say he is such an excellent decoy.'

'Decoy is a good word,' said Mr. Delabole, 'and peculiarly applicable to Asprey. Yes, he has been very useful to us, and has probably been the means of bringing better people and more money into our various concerns than any of the outsiders. I never met another man with that peculiar power of propagating his ideas without unduly forcing them, or in the least committing himself.'

'Do you think that it would be tolerably easy to get hold of this young fellow?'

'My dear Philip, the mere fact that the fellow is young, conveys to me the notion that it is easy to get hold of him either for good or evil, but certainly for evil. The mere fact that he has been poor, and he must have been poor when this old woman adopted him, conveys to me the certainty that he will be covetous and grasping, when he finds himself rich without any merit or labour of his own. He

will want, without trouble, to double the fortune which will be left him, and—we will show him the way.'

Then came a tap at the door, followed by the entrance of a messenger, who announced 'Doctor Asprey.'

'Show him in,' said Philip Vane.

'By all means,' added Mr. Delabole; 'the very man we were wishing to see.'

Hundreds of people had wished to see Doctor Asprey; people of very different kinds, and had wished to see him for very different reasons. Men stricken with what might be mortal illness, lying in their beds raised upon their elbows, and listening with eager ears for the roll of his chariot wheels, or the soft sound of his footstep on the stairs. For not merely did the doctor's professional talent rank very highly, but relying on the strength of his reputation, he would give vent to the boldness and fertility of invention inherent in him, and have recourse to experiments from which most professional men would have shrunk, but which, with him, nearly always

proved successful. In the smoking and card-rooms of clubs, too, few more welcome guests presented themselves; for the Doctor had a fund of anecdote of all kinds, and when he occasionally chose to spare the time, proved that he could hold his own with most men at a rubber. Women, too, delighted to see him, for he had a soft voice and pretty manners, and humoured and played with their little weaknesses without degrading himself or them; and he was adored by children, whose diseases he had made a special study, and whom he would comfort and cure as much by his kindness as by his prescriptions.

Universally respected and beloved then? Not quite. Doctor Tileoff, very old, very eccentric, by some supposed to be mad, but still practising as a consulting physician, had many years before refused to meet Doctor Asprey in consultation, declaring, when pressed for his reasons, that however much he respected the courage of a man who murdered his wife, he did not feel inclined to shake hands with him. Sir Scott Peebles, sergeant-surgeon to

the Queen, declined the honour of Doctor Asprey's acquaintance, and when the Doctor did not receive the appointment of physician extraordinary, for which several of the newspapers had designated him, people said it was owing to Sir Scott's influence at court. Wondering why the usually benevolent old baronet should be so inimical towards his brother practitioner, people remembered that Sir Scott was brother to Mr. Donald Peebles, of the firm of Peebles and Murray, who had been the solicitors to an old lady whom Doctor Asprey attended, and whose will in his favour was successfully contested by her relatives. Baron Bronck, head of the English branch of the great European house of Bronck Brothers, refused to receive Doctor Asprey, who had been recommended to attend the baroness in her confinement, and when asked for his reasons, declared simply that he had seen too much of the Doctor's transactions in the City and in the share market, to have a desire for any farther acquaintance with him.

Of course stories like these had their exactly opposite stories, to balance them. Doctor Asprey's friends declared that old Doctor Tileoff was a lunatic, who ought to hold his consultations in a padded room, and that the story about Mrs. Asprey was a figment of the old man's muddled brain, warped and twisted by his knowledge of the fact that Doctor Asprey had long since pronounced him imbecile and unfit to give any medical opinion. The animosity exhibited by Sir Scott Peebles was attributed to professional jealousy of a younger man, who was rapidly ousting the senile baronet from his position and his practice; while as regards Baron Bronck, it was averred that Doctor Asprey had taken his natural acumen into the City with him; and in investigating certain concerns vouched for by Bronck Brothers, had discovered—well—Doctor Asprey's friends would say no more—but when the next panic came, let Bronck Brothers and their clients look out. So there was a pro-Asprey party and anti-Asprey party, but the former was by far the largest,

and the Doctor's popularity and practice were immense.

His appearance was decidedly in his favour. A tall, upright man, with high forehead and regular features, iron-gray hair and whiskers, and white teeth; always dressed in a dark-blue closely buttoned frock-coat and gray trousers, black high neckerchief, the whitest of linen, and the brightest of boots. His manner earnest without being grave, and pleasant without being undignified; his smile infrequent, but marvellously winning when it came; his interest in the person whom he was addressing intense and undivided. Such outwardly was John Asprey, M.D., of Cavendish-square, and principal physician to St. Vitus's Hospital.

'The very man we were wishing to see,' repeated Mr. Delabole, as the Doctor entered, and having given the hands of each of his friends a strong squeeze—there was always immense meaning in his hand-shake—sank gracefully into an easy-chair.

'I am delighted to hear you say so,' said

the Doctor; 'not frightened of me? "Nec Asprey terrent," to make once more my oft-repeated joke. Some men are always uneasy in the presence of a doctor, but with a chest and a constitution like yours, my dear Delabole—'

'Yes,' interrupted Mr. Delabole, who was, nevertheless, chafing under the Doctor's fixed look; for he was perfectly conscious of the inelegance of his figure, and hated any attention being called to it; 'quite so, as you say. And what is the news this morning?'

'I have not yet seen the paper,' said the Doctor, unconsciously parodying a great statesman. 'That was a charming dinner we had last night. I fully expected to see you there, Mr. Vane,' he continued, turning to Philip.

'Mrs. Bendixen was good enough to ask me,' replied Vane; 'but I was unfortunately detained here until it was too late to go home and dress; the slave of the lamp, you know, Doctor.'

'Why not, my dear Mr. Vane,' said the Doctor, bending forward with a pleasant smile,

'why not transform yourself into the slave of the ring? Do you blush? Is there any truth in the rumours which the little birds are whispering about?'

'The little birds are canards, Doctor, and you know what faith is to be put in them.'

'I think not,' said the Doctor placidly, 'I think not, or a lovely ear, which I noticed last night, more lovely by far than the diamond which it held, would have listened more graciously to the honey sweet which one of the company present was endeavouring to instil into it.'

'Indeed,' said Philip; 'one of the company present; and who might that be?'

'The Doctor himself,' said Delabole, 'of course.'

'Not I—not I, indeed,' said Doctor Asprey. 'A man much younger, much handsomer, and more likely in every way to win favour in the eyes of a peerless lady—Mr. Gerald Hardinge.'

'Ah, by the way,' said Mr. Delabole, rising and drawing a heavy curtain across the door,

which opened into the outer office, 'let us hear all you know about that young gentleman.'

'All I know is not very much,' said Doctor Asprey. 'I first met him some two years ago at the house of Mrs. Entwistle, an eccentric old woman, whom I was called in to attend for a spinal complaint under which she had long been suffering, and which so cripples her that she has lost all power of motion, and even in the house is wheeled about in a chair. I saw this young fellow in constant attendance upon the old lady, discussing her case with me, giving orders to the servants, &c., and I naturally imagined that he was Mrs. Entwistle's grandson. It was not until lately that I discovered that he is in no way related to her; that before she had ever seen him the old lady took a fancy to some pictures he had painted, and sent to London for sale; that when he called upon her she took a great affection to him, declaring him strongly to resemble some dead member of her family, and that he has, ever since, remained with her as her adopted son.'

'Deuced pleasant for him,' said Mr. Delabole. 'Why didn't some nice old lady take a fancy to me when I was a lad?'

'Yes,' said Philip Vane, 'and teach you to play cribbage instead of baccarat, and Pope Joan instead of three-card loo! What a comfort you would have been at the old lady's fireside!'

'Young Hardinge has been remarkably steady, I understand, and will reap the benefit of his prudence by inheriting all Mrs. Entwistle's money,' said Doctor Asprey, cutting in.

'Is that certain?' asked Mr. Delabole.

'Certain!' said Doctor Asprey. 'I had it from Platting, who is her attorney.'

'And how long is Mrs. Entwistle likely to live?' asked Philip Vane.

'Not more than two months,' said the Doctor, 'but in all probability nothing like so much; her life hangs on a thread; she may expire at any moment.'

'Then the sooner we make young Hardinge's acquaintance the better,' said Mr. Delabole.

'Will you meet him at dinner at my house on—say Tuesday next,' said the Doctor, looking at his note-book; 'and you, too, Mr. Vane?'

Both of them said they should be delighted.

And so Madge Pierrepoint's husband, and the man who had loved Madge Pierrepoint so dearly, were about to be brought face to face!

CHAPTER V.

'SCENE: A STREET IN LYONS.'

Such of the good people of Springside as took an interest in the affairs of their neighbours (and they were by no means a small proportion of the population), were both astonished and disappointed at no match being made up between the Reverend Onesiphorus Drage and the pretty widow, to whom the care of his child had been confided during his absence. The story of Mrs. Drage's last request, which was assiduously bruited about immediately after that good lady's death, had been received with a certain amount of discredit, and a large amount of scorn. Virgin noses, brought together in conclave at Dorcas meetings, had sniffed their contempt at Mrs. Pick-

ering's boldness, and wifely lips had laughed in disdain at Mr. Drage's innocence, in thinking that any woman would not merely recommend her husband to fill her place, but would actually nominate her successor. Mr. Drage's temporary absence from Springside, and Mrs. Pickering's quasi-adoption of little Bertha, were regarded by the worthy townspeople as devised by the acuteness of the widow, who, bold as she might be, had not sufficient audacity to permit her courtship by the parson to be carried on 'under the noses,' as they expressed it, of those who had known his deceased wife. And when the news was spread that Mr. Drage was coming back, the usual amount of tea-table hospitality received a great impetus, and all the scandal-mongers of the place were expectant of their prey. The question whether Mrs. Pickering would remain at the rectory was for some time debated with the keenest anxiety, until at last it was proved, to the satisfaction of all parties, that, whether she stopped or whether she went, she would be equally wrong. By stopping she

would outrage all laws of society, and it would be a question whether a statement of the facts ought not to be submitted to the bishop; by going she would act most artfully, and take the surest step to induce the rector to invite her to come back to the house as its head.

Even the fact that Mrs. Pickering, immediately after the rector's return, took up quite a new line of life, and entered upon her duties as housekeeper to Sir Geoffry Heriot, the new tenant of Wheatcroft, did not suffice to disabuse the Springsideites of their belief in her ultimate intentions about their rector. Mrs. Pickering had found the parson more difficult to ensnare than she had at first believed, said the worthy townsfolk to each other, and, though they were by no means aware of it, accredited her as a disciple of Mrs. Peachum's doctrine, 'by keeping men off you keep them on.' Over the evening muffins and tea-cakes (Springside is renowned for its confectionery, and has given its name to a particularly luscious and sticky kind of bun) were breathed rumours that the housekeeper had already con-

stituted herself a great favourite with her new master, whom she was reported to be 'playing off' against her former employer. That there were reasons for these rumours was generally believed; even the most incredulous could not help admitting that, during the whole time he had held the living, the rector's visits had never been so frequent to any of his parishioners as they were now to Wheatcroft. So ran the gossips' talk, which like nearly all gossips' talk, however exaggerated, had some truth in it.

After the first shock of her revelation to him that she was no widow, but a woman who had been deserted by a husband yet alive, Mr. Drage had determined upon the line of conduct which he would for the future pursue in regard to Mrs. Pickering, and had carried it out to the letter.

'There is an end, then,' he said to her, after a few minutes had passed away, and the first shock of astonishment and grief had subsided, 'there is an end, then, to my dream of the last twelvemonth! It passes away as

other dreams have passed before it; name, and fame, and—health; I have dreamed of all, and found none! It is wisely ordained, doubtless,' he continued, 'but—it is a great blow. I had built so on it; why, I know not, for, try my hardest, I could never find any expression in your letters which would lead me to believe you understood my feelings towards you; yet I had built so on it, I can scarcely believe even now that the whole fabric lies shattered at a word. We shall still be friends though, now?'

'Surely we shall still be friends!' she replied; 'you cannot for an instant think that what you have said to me just now could cause any alteration in the regard and gratitude which I have always felt towards you.'

'No,' he said, somewhat nervously, 'I suppose not.'

'Rather,' she continued, 'should you think what perfect trust I must have in you to confide to you the secret of my life. There is no one else in the whole world who knows of my marriage; the fact has been concealed

even from my sister; it is known but to me —and to him!'

There was a lengthened pause, during which, though Mr. Drage sat with his face shaded by his hand, it was evident he was under the influence of deep emotion. When he looked up again there were traces of tears upon his cheeks, and his voice was unsteady as he said, 'Will—will what has happened make any difference in your decision upon Captain Cleethorpe's proposition?'

'No,' she said, 'it will not.'

'And your decision is—?' he asked.

'To accept it without doubt,' she replied. 'Even had I a choice of the ways of life, I do not think I should hesitate in accepting what has been offered to me in such a kindly spirit, and which, quite peaceful and retired as it must be, will suit me so well. That illness from which, under Providence, I was rescued by your kindness, robbed me of a certain amount of youthful strength, and left me unfitted for any very active employment; besides, I have formed friendships here, which I

should regret giving up, and I should scarcely have the heart to commence anew in a strange place.'

'You are right,' said the rector, still sitting with averted face. 'It was selfish, indeed, to imagine for an instant that you could come to any other decision. And it would not much matter to me,' he added, struggling with his breaking voice; 'my stay must be so very short.'

The peculiarity of his manner struck Madge instantly.

'What do you mean, Mr. Drage?' she asked, laying her hand lightly on his sleeve.

'Simply,' he said, removing his hand from his face, in which burned the hectic flush, which always fluttered there when under mental excitement, 'I mean I could not trust myself to be near you, to be frequently brought within the charm of your presence, under the spell of your voice, without thinking of you as I have done during—during all the time I have been abroad. There was no sin in it then, Heaven knows! What I dared to

hope in regard to you had been hoped by my dead wife, and was thought of almost as much in the interest of my little child as my own! Had you been free, and had rejected me, I should still have hoped, and hoping died; but what you have told me to-day renders such a thought of you a sin, and—and I am too weak to fight against it.'

When he ceased he leaned back in his chair, apparently quite overcome.

'You misjudge your own strength, Mr. Drage,' said Madge, bending towards him; 'you don't know yourself so well as I know you; you are physically weak just now, and overwrought by this interview, which has, indeed, been sufficiently trying to both of us, but after a few days' rest you will be yourself again, and you will find your inclination keeping you where your duty lies, sentinel at this outpost which has been committed to your keeping.'

'You think so?' he asked anxiously.

'I am sure of it,' she replied. 'Do not let me think that, with the full knowledge

that you could be nothing more to me than a friend, you would refuse me that friendship, that counsel and comfort, of which I stand so much in need. It would be hard indeed that the fact of my having confided to you the secret of my forlorn position, should have lost me that regard which I valued most!'

'My own folly would have been the cause, not what you told me,' he interrupted.

'What I told you would have brought about the result which I am showing you,' she replied. 'And, again, where would the peaceful, happy future, which I have pictured to myself, be for me, with the thought that my remaining here had driven you out from amongst the people who love you, and with whom so many happy years of your life had been spent? Where would be my peace of mind when I reflected that all this wretchedness would have been spared to you and yours, had I not come among you in a false name and under a false pretence?'

He motioned with his hand for her to

cease, then said in a low tone, 'You must not speak thus of yourself.'

'I must,' she said, 'for it is true! If you would silence me, accept the position I offer you and entreat you to take—be my dear, dear friend, helping me, as you have done, to fight the battle here, and to look for the reward—hereafter!'

And amid the tears which fell like rain down his wan cheeks she heard him say solemnly:

'I will!'

Not another word was uttered, but the compact which was entered into was nevertheless religiously kept.

The next morning Captain Cleethorpe called upon Mrs. Pickering, and heard with great delight that she had determined on accepting the position which he had offered her, and seldom had the retired Indian officer cared to express his pleasure more openly.

'I don't mind telling you now, Mrs. Pickering,' said he, 'but this has been quite a pet project of mine. I was a bit doubtful about

the padre at one time, and fond of him as I am, as we all are indeed, I should have been glad if he could have postponed his arrival for a few days. I knew the great interest he took in you, and I thought he might feel that the house of an old retired Indian officer, no matter how old or how retired, might scarcely be a fit place for you. However, I shall take an early opportunity of bringing Mr. Drage and Sir Geoffry Heriot together, and I am sure that they will get on remarkably well. What I want you to understand, and what I am sure you will feel as soon as you have been a few days at Wheatcroft, is that your position of housekeeper will be simply a nominal one. By this I mean to say that it must have some name, and as you cannot be called military secretary, or commissary-general, or aide-de-camp, one is obliged to fall back upon the ordinary British formula. If I had had my way, I would have had you called chief of the staff; and if the old General only appreciates you as much as I expect, you will find your position both a confidential and a pleasant one.'

Captain Cleethorpe's predictions came true to the letter. When, a few days afterwards, Sir Geoffry Heriot arrived at Wheatcroft, and Mrs. Pickering was personally introduced to him, with admirable tact, by the Captain, she found in her new employer a man accustomed to command, so accustomed, indeed, as to be not unwilling to slip out of his buckram suit, and to have the burden of responsibility removed to other shoulders. Time had whitened Sir Geoffry's iron-gray hair, leaving it massed and curling as before, and blanched his small moustache, but the bronzed cheeks shone even more deeply red, in contrast with the white hair, and, under the bushy eyebrows, the glance of the dark eyes was prompt and expressive as ever.

Little time did it take Sir Geoffry Heriot to appreciate the character and qualities of the new addition to his domestic circle. He had written for a housekeeper, and had expected to find a stout, elderly personage, of motherly presence and dubious grammar, who would take care that his dinners were ordered, his

rooms dusted, and his linen aired; and would act as a species of buffer between himself and his tradespeople. What he found was, a young and handsome woman of good education, refined and lady-like in her manner; such a woman, in fact, as he might have met with on the rare occasions when he accepted some of his brother officers' hospitality in India, but such a one as he had not been brought into close or frequent contact with since his youthful days. Over the old man, strict disciplinarian, bitter hardened cynic, and woman-hater as he was, Madge Pierrepoint exercised her accustomed influence. Not that, for one instant, Sir Geoffry Heriot dreamed of falling in love with her; the absurdity of such a proceeding in a man of his age towards a woman of hers, and the difference in their respective positions (a difference never insisted on, but, at the same time, never forgotten), would have prevented his allowing himself so to blunder, even had he the smallest inclination. But he did not disguise from himself that the perpetual presence of such a woman around

and about him, had a certain softening and refining influence, and that, week by week, his consideration for her increased, as she rendered herself more and more essential to his well-being, and to the comfort of all around him.

This influence was shown in odd and various ways. To Captain Cleethorpe, as a man of good position in his own profession, as the intimate ally of his friend, Colonel Goole, and as a gentleman who had taken some trouble in regard to the purchase of Wheatcroft, Sir Geoffry was polite, and, to a certain extent, genial, placing himself, as it were, under the Captain's wing, so far as the Springside society was concerned, accepting introductions to the retired Indians, both military and civil, at the club, and altogether so conducting himself as to give his acquaintances reason to believe that the stories of his cold hauteur, which had heralded his advent, were exaggerated, if not absolutely false. But when Captain Cleethorpe, a few days after Sir Geoffry's arrival, drove out to Wheatcroft, taking with

him the Reverend Onesiphorus Drage, the new tenant of that pleasant abode relapsed into such a state of ramrod stiffness, and curt phraseology, as rendered the visit anything but a pleasant one.

Determined not to be discouraged, on the next occasion of his meeting with the old officer, Captain Cleethorpe mentioned Mr. Drage's name, which elicited from Sir Geoffry an expression of his contempt for what he was pleased to term 'psalm smiting,' and of his aversion to the clerical profession in general. Captain Cleethorpe did not pursue the subject, but took occasion later on, in the presence of other persons, to whom he apparently addressed himself, to tell the story of the manner in which Mr. and Mrs. Drage had tended Mrs. Pickering, during the illness which attacked her on her first arrival in Springside, and had devoted themselves to her on her recovery.

Sir Geoffry said nothing at the time, but he requested Mrs. Pickering's attendance in the library that evening, and after handing her to a chair with as much ceremony as he

would have shown in the old days to the wife of the Governor-General, he spoke to her on a few unimportant topics, and gradually led her to speak of the commencement of her first acquaintance with Mr. Drage. Madge, who knew nothing of the reception which the rector had experienced at Sir Geoffry's hands, spoke, as she felt, in the warmest and most enthusiastic manner of her old friend. And the next day Sir Geoffry called at the rectory, and took especial care to obliterate any traces of the ill-feeling which might be lingering in Mr. Drage's mind.

The acquaintance, thus strangely begun, speedily ripened. It was impossible for any one to be thrown much in company with the rector, so simple-minded in worldly matters, so steadfast and earnest in his calling, without becoming interested in him. Sir Geoffry Heriot had met no such specimen of man before; during his career in India he had always regarded the regimental chaplain in the light of an objectionable, though necessary excrescence, and since his return home he had paid

but little attention to the public rites of religion, or to those administering them. But he became so profoundly impressed with the views and conversation of his new-made friend when 'out of the wood,' as, in his old style of garrison slang, he was accustomed to speak of it, that Mr. Drage, rising in the reading-desk one Sunday, was astonished to find himself confronted by the martial figure of the old General, who paid strict attention to the service, and, on the next occasion of the rector's visit to Wheatcroft, was remarkably stringent in his criticism on the curate's sermon.

The plunge once made, the Sunday visit to the church became a regular habit, and the intercourse between this oddly-assorted pair of friends was much increased thereby.

The first and chief point of interest between them was, of course, their common regard for Mrs. Pickering. To sing her praises; to talk of her, as, indeed, he felt towards her now, after the schooling to which he had necessarily subjected himself, with something like brotherly affection; to dwell upon the

regard which she had inspired in his dead wife, and the worship in which she was held by his little child, was the rector's greatest delight. To this hymn of praise the old General growled a supplementary chorus. The knowledge which, in the short time, he had gained of his friend's singleness of purpose and simplicity of character, rendered him confident of the sincerity of the rector's expressed opinion about Mrs. Pickering, and Sir Geoffry often wondered why Mr. Drage had never attempted to supply the place of his late wife by one whom the deceased lady esteemed so highly. 'Perhaps the very reason!' the old warrior said grimly to himself; 'if the rector is ever to fall a victim again, it will probably be to a totally different sort of person, some prattling, flirting jade, who will amuse herself by worrying his old age, and snubbing her step-daughter.'

With little Bertha, indeed, Sir Geoffry did not make friends. When, as not unfrequently happened, she accompanied her father to Wheatcroft, she almost invariably remained

with Mrs. Pickering, while the gentlemen were smoking in the library or in the garden: and when occasionally the General came across her, he bestowed upon her but a slight and ceremonious greeting, in no way in accordance with his usual manner towards his adult visitors. Madge noticed this, but said nothing.

One day Bertha was unwell. The next day Mr. Drage came tearing up to Wheatcroft in a fly, to announce that the doctor had declared the illness to be one of childhood's diseases in a virulent form, and to implore Mrs. Pickering's assistance, if Sir Geoffry would consent to her going to the little patient, already clamouring for her.

Both agreed at once, the one heartily, the other graciously, and Madge went, and was away from Wheatcroft for four days, installed in the sick-chamber.

Those were dull days for Sir Geoffry Heriot. He missed the companionship he had grown accustomed to, and rebelled against the chance which had deprived him of it. The

old, hard, cynical spirit in which he had erst revelled, came back upon him, and made itself his master once more; Riley and the other servants, who, under Madge's sway, imagined they had enjoyed a foretaste of Paradise, found out the difference, and were quickly relegated to the Inferno. If Mr. Drage could have come, he might have had some softening influence, but he was of course in constant attendance on his sick child.

When Mrs. Pickering returned she went straight into the library, where Sir Geoffry sat over his newspaper. He rose to receive her, and offered his hand, in an old-fashioned, ceremonious manner.

'You are welcome back,' said he. 'I am glad to see you.'

'The child is out of danger,' said Madge, without reference to his remarks; 'the doctor says she will live.'

'I suppose that is a matter for congratulation?' said Sir Geoffry coldly.

'You suppose, Sir Geoffry?'

'I have known a child grow up to be a

disgrace to his father, and a girl become a woman when she had better have died in childhood.'

Madge looked at him. His face was set, and gray, and rigid, and, looking at it, she held her peace.

But she guessed what she had often suspected before, that Sir Geoffry was the victim of some domestic trouble. What his previous private life had been she knew not; she had never inquired. All she knew of him was learned from himself, and he had never hinted at wife or family; but in the tone of his voice, and in the hardness of his manner, Madge recognised something more than his ordinary cynicism, and made up her mind that, in his reference to Bertha, he was alluding to a daughter of his own who had brought trouble upon him.

The subject had an unpleasant fascination for her, and at last she determined upon speaking about it to Captain Cleethorpe, who had been acquainted with Sir Geoffry for many years, and would doubtless be able to

set her mind at rest. So she seized her opportunity and spoke to him.

Had Sir Geoffry been married? Captain Cleethorpe thought undoubtedly. Was the lady dead? Captain Cleethorpe thought no question of it. Had there been any family? Yes. A girl? Not that Captain Cleethorpe knew of. A boy, who had died? No, Captain Cleethorpe could not say he had died; the fact was—shy of mentioning these sort of things generally, don't you know, but between us, intimately connected with Sir Geoffry, Mrs. Pickering, it don't matter—the fact was the boy had gone to grief, and nobody had ever known exactly what had become of him.

Gone to grief? Captain Cleethorpe meant that the young man had deserted his home, and perhaps been discarded by his friends. Madge found herself frequently cogitating about this boy. His position must be like Gerald's, she thought, as Gerald was when she knew him; but, according to Rose's account, Gerald had now been restored to his friends,

and was living in happiness and affluence. Could not a similar reconciliation be effected between Sir Geoffry and his son? From what she could make out from Captain Cleethorpe, sufficient time had passed to dull the keen edge of such injuries as either father or son might have imagined they had received. She would try her influence with Sir Geoffry, but first she must find out who the young man was, and where and what he was then doing.

This discovery she made in an unexpected manner. Sir Geoffry had begged her to go through the contents of an old bullock trunk, which, on his arrival, had been stowed in the housekeeper's room; but which, when he came upon it in the course of a tour of inspection, he pronounced mouldy and broken, and only worthy of being got rid of. The contents were many and various. Some books, damp and musty smelling; several suits of light clothing intended for a hot climate, but now stained and mildewed; two or three faded uniform sashes; bits of dull and tarnished lace; a number of Indian newspapers tied to-

gether in a roll; and many letters and memoranda huddled together in hopeless confusion at the bottom of the trunk. Madge went carefully through this heterogeneous mass, and had put aside a certain number of papers for destruction, and another lot to await Sir Geoffry's decision, when, in taking up a letter, an enclosure dropped from it. It was a water-colour sketch, roughly but cleverly done, of a street in an old French town. Looking at it, she seemed to recognise the place at once as one perfectly familiar to her. There was the great two towered cathedral, with the market-place at its base, full of life and bustle; there were the cafés and the estaminet, with a big wooden barrel as a sign swinging over its portal; there was the cooper's, with the billets of wood lying in front of his door; the glove-maker's, with the great wooden hand; there were even the hooded cabriolets, in which the peasantry had come in from the rural districts, and the dogs dragging the produce-laden barrows. Here it all was, just exactly as she had seen it. Seen it? she had never been abroad, and yet

every detail in the picture was perfectly familiar to her.

Thinking it over, she had a strange recollection of Dobson, the manager at Wexeter, in a uniform and cocked-hat, and Mr. Boodle also in uniform, and old Minneken in tights and Hessian boots, with tassels to them—yes, now it all came back to her! Dobson was General Damas, Boodle was Claude Melnotte, and Minneken was Beauséant, the play was the *Lady of Lyons*, and the scene was one which Gerald Hardinge had painted for the Wexeter Theatre! They had all admired it, she remembered; they had all said, such of them as knew anything about it, how wonderfully true to nature it was. And Gerald had laughed, and said he had drawn it from an early recollection. Nay, more, if she had wanted farther corroboration, there were the initials 'G. H.' in the corner of the sketch.

How did Sir Geoffry Heriot come into possession of a sketch done years ago by Gerald Hardinge? The letter would tell her that. She took it up and read it. It was written in

a boy's round hand, dated from Lille, and commenced, 'My dear father.' Dull and uninteresting enough, written as though to order, detailing the course of his studies, and the unvarying manner of his life. It expressed a hope that the person to whom it was addressed would return in good health, and that they should soon meet. The last paragraph ran thus:

I think you will say that since I addressed you six months ago, I have made some improvement in my drawing; I take great interest in it, and am very fond of it. I send you a sketch of our market-place, which I copied from nature, and which, the professor says, is very good.

Your affectionate son,

GEORGE HERIOT.

As the letter fluttered to the ground, Madge Pierrepoint knew that Sir Geoffry Heriot's discarded son, and the scene-painter, Gerald Hardinge, were one and the same man.

CHAPTER VI.

THE WOMAN OF THE WORLD.

A COUNTRY cousin taken by his metropolitan host down Biffen-street, Park-lane, and told that the houses in that narrow and somewhat dingy locality were among the most tempting lots offered by fashionable house-agents to moneyed commerce desiring to establish itself in the regions of fashion, would surely be very much surprised. True that there is about them that surrounding of mews and small public-house seemingly inseparable from desirable residences. True that they are situate in the heart of that exclusive quarter, which is, as it were, the Faubourg St. Germain of London, concentrating within its limits the old families, and looking down with contempt upon Belgravia and Tyburnia.

True that the drainage is imperfect, and that the rates are enormous. Granting all these advantages, the country cousin might yet be excused for wondering at there being anything like a struggle for the possession of a residence in Biffen-street.

For what he would see would be short rows of high-shouldered, tall houses, separated by a narrow, ill-paved street, with—running across it at right angles — another street, in which are horse-dealers' yards, and small chandlers' shops, and struggling dairies, and other attempts at domestic commerce on a very small scale. The doors of the houses in Biffen-street are so tiny, that one wonders how the enormous giants in plush, who, on fine summer evenings, are to be seen sunning themselves at the portals, manage to squeeze through them ; the windows looking upon the street are old-fashioned and airless, with small panes frequently not too clean, and sashes from which the paint is worn away; the areas are deep and narrow black tanks, and the houses, so far as outward appearance

is concerned, are certainly not more desirable than those to be found in the lodging-letting purlieus of Russell-square.

But once inside, our supposed country cousin would find everything changed, and would speedily be able to understand why Biffen-street commands such high rents, and is so eagerly competed for. For on the west side, at least, the façade to the street is merely a brick delusion or a stucco snare, the fronts of the houses being, Hibernically speaking, at the back; the narrow-paned windows are either dummies, or might be, for all the use that is made of them, enshrouded as they are in bowers of luxurious creeping plants, or hidden away behind ferneries and aquaria; the rooms in the houses are not numerous, but nearly all are large, lofty, and well-proportioned, with great bay windows, which, chiefest charm of all, overlook the broad expanse of Hyde Park.

In a large room on the first floor of one of the best of these houses, on a sofa of peculiar make, with stuffed handles at either

end, and small covered wheels in place of the ordinary castors, a woman lay with her face turned towards the window, and her head thrown back to catch as much as possible of the soft evening air. The lower half of the walls was fitted with book-shelves, the upper half hung with a few rare prints and engravings; the mantelpiece was above the height of an ordinary man's stature, the fire-place was tiled, and the space which in winter was occupied by the 'dogs,' was filled in with looking-glass, in front of which were pots of rare flowers. The furniture, which was massive and antique, was in black oak and dark blue velvet; the thick carpet was of a sombre Persian pattern, and the whole room had the appearance of a studious man's library. But it was a woman of the world's boudoir, and its owner lay on the sofa at the window.

A tall woman, of some three-and-fifty years of age, of whom the young men of the day are accustomed to say that 'she must once have been good-looking.' If clear cut features, soft dark hair and eyes, and shapely figure

constitute beauty, she is more than good-looking still. Her complexion is very pale, and constant suffering has left a half-worn, half-irritable expression visible in tell-tale lines round her mouth and brow; but her eyes are full of fire, and no physiognomist would fail to mark the firmness and determination evinced in the tight-closing of her lips, as she wrestles and battles with the sharp spasms of pain, which from time to time assail her. Unmistakably well-born and well-nurtured; dressed in a long flowing black cashmere robe, which, hanging in folds over her feet, is confined by a girdle round her waist; with a line of soft white muslin round the throat, and with a piece of handsome black lace brought down in a point, after the fashion of a modern widow's cap, on to her forehead, and falling gracefully over her shoulders.

Twilight has deepened into darkness, the rumble of a few carriages driving to entertainments in the now fast decaying season is only occasional, and the hum of the people,

who wearied out by their day's labour, or of the children who, cooped up in courts and alleys, have come to sit and play about on the greensward, to try and get some notion, however faint, of what the country may be like, has died away; but the occupant of the sofa still lies at the window, gazing out wearily and listlessly over the broad expanse before her. A shaded reading-lamp stands on a small table by her side, and a book with a library ticket pasted on it has fallen to the floor from the hand which hangs in weariness on the back of the sofa; but since that access of pain which had caused her to drop the volume, she has made no attempt to move, and there she lies, still, and mute, and uncomplaining.

Through the darkness glides a small, neat, womanly figure, until it reaches the sofa side, where it stops. There has been no sound of footfall, no rustling of dress, but the lady seems aware of the presence, for she turns her head quietly and says in a full, rich voice, 'You there, Willis?'

'Yes, madam, I came to tell you it had struck eleven.'

'A work of supererogation, and as such to be avoided! The neighbouring churches are of use to me in one way at all events; I learn the flight of time from their clocks, if not from their preachers. What then?'

'Are you not ready for the morphia and for bed?' said the girl. 'Are you not tired, madam?'

'Tired!' echoed the invalid. 'Good Heaven! if you only knew how tired I am of everything, and yet how unwilling to give it up! Yes, Willis, I am tired, but I don't intend going to bed just yet.'

'Doctor Asprey begged me to see that you were not up later than eleven.'

'When you are Doctor Asprey's lady's-maid, you will attend to what he says; while you remain with me, you will obey me alone. I shall not leave this room until Mr. Gerald returns.'

The girl had been too long in her mistress's service to attempt to argue with her,

so she merely bowed, and was about to retire when the lady stopped her by a gesture.

'Stay,' she said, 'do not leave me, Willis; I have been alone now for a couple of hours, and there is no society I get so soon sick of as my own. That was a bad attack I had just now.'

'It was, indeed, madam,' said the girl earnestly, 'a very bad one.'

'You thought I was dying, Willis?' said the lady, looking fixedly at her, with a smile upon her lips.

'I confess that I was very frightened,' said Willis.

'As frightened as you were three years ago when we were in Greece?'

'Do you mean, madam, when we were at Mite—Mite—'

'At Mitylene.'

'Yes! You looked so exactly the same, madam, this evening, as you did then.'

'I felt exactly the same, Willis; that curious languor, that sense of my hold on life gradually, but surely, relaxing; that im-

possibility to fight against the icy numbness stealing over me; all those sensations I had at Mitylene. I had almost forgotten them until they were renewed to-night. Now tell me, what did Doctor Asprey say to you on the stairs?'

'He said—' and the girl's voice hesitated, and her cheeks flushed as she spoke, 'he said that—that you had been very ill, madam; but that you were better.'

'That was oracular, indeed,' said the invalid, smiling. 'Did you come into my service yesterday, Willis? or do you take me for a fool, that you think to put me off with such nonsense? Tell me plainly, what did the doctor say?'

The girl hesitated again, but the invalid's eyes were fixed upon her, and she proceeded. 'Doctor Asprey said, madam, that he had only arrived just in time to—to "pull you through," were his words, and that if you had another attack he—you—'

'I should die in it, I suppose,' said the invalid quietly.

'He would not answer for the consequences, was what the doctor said.'

'It is pretty much the same thing! And you were frightened to tell me this? Have you not seen me for years looking death in the face, as it were, and do you think that the hint of its nearer approach could have any effect upon me? I told you, when you first came to me, that there was a chance of my dying at any moment, and that you would probably have to get your character for your next place from my executors, and now—Did I not hear the street-door shut? Mr. Gerald is returned, he will come straight to this room. There are tears in your eyes, Willis; dry them at once, and get away before he comes; you know how quick and observant he is.'

Obeying this order, Willis hurried from the room. She had scarcely done so, when Gerald Hardinge, entering, walked straight to the sofa and seated himself in a low chair beside it, taking one of its occupant's hands between his.

Rose Pierrepoint was right in saying that Gerald's personal appearance had greatly improved since the old days. His face had a colour in it, which it lacked then, and his strong active figure was set off by well-cut clothes. His voice, always soft and refined, sounded singularly sweet, as, bending over the figure on the sofa, and lightly kissing its forehead, he said, 'Why do I find you up so late, to-night; is not this dissipation against all orders?'

'This dissipation, as you call it, has occurred wholly and solely on your account. I sat up to see you.'

'It is all very well to say that,' said Gerald, laughing, 'but you were always addicted to frivolity, and you have been amusing yourself, I know, with watching the people in the Park.'

'My dear Gerald, even the philanderings of tall guardsmen with short plain cooks, and the pastimes of dirty children, have ceased to inspire me with much interest. That was all

to be seen while daylight remained, and it has been dark for the last two hours.'

'And yet you have remained here—I was going to say reading, but the position of the book,' pointing to it, 'is scarcely complimentary to the author.'

'The book,' said the invalid, glancing at the fallen volume, 'is the usual accurate description of fashionable life from the scullery-maid's point of view. No, I have been amusing myself in thinking.'

'Thinking of what?'

'Many things and persons, you among the number; but I will not inflict upon you an inventory of my thoughts, at all events just now. You dined with Doctor Asprey. Had you a pleasant party? Who were there?'

'Only two other men, neither of whom I think you know, a Mr. Delabole and a Mr. Vane.'

'I have met Mr. Delabole, a coarse, common vulgarian, pushing and presuming; just the style of person one expects to find at Madame Uffizzi's, where I met him, and who

is invited by her on account of business relations with her husband. Who is the other man, one of the Northumberland Vanes?'

'I should think not,' said Gerald, laughing; 'a pleasing, rattling, agreeable kind of fellow, who talked very well. He had to do a goodish deal of talking, by the way, for the doctor was sent for early in the dinner, and was away for an hour.'

'What was his summons?'

'To a patient of course, and an urgent case I fancy, for he rose from the table directly his most mysterious butler whispered in his ear. I need not tell you that he did not mention the name or the case.'

'Doctor Asprey is a model of discretion,' said the invalid, with a faint smile; then leaning a little towards her companion, and laying her hand on his, she added, 'Would it surprise you, my dear Gerald, to hear that it was to see me that Doctor Asprey left his friends?'

'You!' echoed the young man.

'Me. After you left the house, I had warn-

ing of a bad attack, and when its imminence became certain, I thought it better that the doctor should be here to stave it off, if possible.'

'And you hadn't a thought to send for me at such a time,' said the young man, bending tenderly over her, but speaking in tones of reproach.

'What good could it have done?' she asked. 'I knew you were enjoying yourself, and life is too short to let slip any such opportunity. You could have done me no good, and the sight of you, and the thought that I was leaving you, would not have rendered death more pleasant to me.'

'You must not speak like that,' said Gerald gently.

'And why not?' said the invalid, with a smile; 'the fact will not be averted or postponed by our ignoring it, and I have a strong conviction that my hold on life, which of late years has been sufficiently feeble, is gradually relaxing altogether.'

'What makes you think that?' he said, in a low, tremulous voice.

'I do not think it,' she replied; 'I know it. Five or six years ago I went for a tour in the East alone, that is to say, with Willis for my sole companion; while in Constantinople I had a severe attack of rheumatism, and was recommended by a French physician, who attended me, to try the baths of Vassilica, in the island of Mitylene, which, at one time, were famous for their cure of such disorders. I went to Mitylene, and found it paradise; and when you have no longer this old woman to tie you to this detestable place, you must go there, Gerald, and recompense yourself for having given up a portion of your youth to her love of your companionship.'

'If it pleases you to speak in this way, of course it is not for me to check you,' said the young man, shrugging his shoulders.

'There,' said the invalid, 'I will say no more on that head since it displeases you, but will continue my story. The baths did me good, and the climate rendered me quite

another being; it seemed to me that, for the first time, I knew what life was, as distinguished from existence. I forgot that perpetual gnawing pain which had never left me for so many years, and I began to think it not impossible that in time I should have some toleration for my fellow-creatures. Willis thought the Golden Age had arrived, and I had some idea of taking up my quarters there for good, and establishing myself as a kind of civilised Lady Hester Stanhope among the Greek rayahs, when something happened which changed all my intentions. Close to Mitylene is a place called Lovochari, or the Village of the Lepers, a terrible place, where the people so afflicted are herded together. I had been warned not to go, but I persisted, and dearly I paid for my obstinacy. The sight was terrific, and once seen, was impossible to be got rid of. All day, after my return, I tried to shut it from my mental vision, but there it remained, and at night the hideous objects which I had seen rose before me more terrible than ever; I suppose

the fatigue and the horror under which I laboured had something to do with it, but that night I experienced a new phase in my illness. During Willis's temporary absence from the room I fell into a comatose state, a kind of trance, in the commencement of which I felt my life, as it were, gradually slipping away from me; I seemed to be growing weaker and weaker, pulseless, dead; for I was dead, so far as power of motion, thought, or feeling was concerned. I need not tell you how I was brought round, or bore you with the details of my recovery, which was as sudden as had been the attack. I need only say, my dear Gerald, that this evening I have gone through an exactly similar phase of my illness, and that I know that Doctor Asprey thinks that the wolf, whose approach has been so often announced, is about to come down upon me at last.'

Overcome by emotion, the young man sat silent, only pressing the hand which he held between his own.

'Do not think that I am going to be sen-

timental, my dear Gerald,' continued the invalid, 'or that I intend saying to you any "last words," or any nonsense of that kind. Notwithstanding all my ailments, I have amused myself sufficiently in life, and I am human enough to care sufficiently about such low creature comforts as good eating and drinking, warmth and luxury, not to be overjoyed at the prospects of having speedily to give them up; as for parting from you, I never intend to hint at the subject. I hope that one evening we shall say good-night as usual—there, now, I am drifting into the very sentimental nonsense that I wish to avoid. What I have to say and must say is purely practical. It will be no surprise to you to hear that I have left you all I have in the world.'

His head was averted, and for an instant he made no response; when he turned round his cheeks were burning.

'It seems horrible to talk to you in this cold-blooded way,' said he, 'after all your goodness to me, and at such a moment, but

you have given me an opportunity which I have long wanted, and which I must not miss. What I want to say is, to say in all gentleness and affection, that I cannot accept any farther kindness at your hands; that I cannot take this legacy from you to the exclusion of others who have doubtless claims of blood upon you.'

The invalid smiled faintly as she said: 'Persons with claims of blood I suppose are relations. Providence has kindly spared me any such annoyances! And I think you will allow, before we part to-night, that I have not been acting, nor am I going to act, like a stupid old woman, as the world most probably believes, but that, at all events, there has been method in my madness. Now, Gerald, take this key and open the middle drawer in that cabinet; close to the front you will find a small soft paper parcel—bring it to me.'

The young man obeyed. The invalid was about to open the paper, but she refrained.

'Open it yourself,' she said.

Gerald took off the outer wrappings of

paper, and came upon a miniature painted on ivory, in the style so much in vogue half a century ago.

'Look at it well, and tell me if you know for whom it is intended.'

Gerald took the portrait to the lamp and examined it carefully. It represented a young man of about five-and-twenty years of age, with whiskerless cheeks, and clear blue eyes, and fair hair, curling in a thick crisp mass on his head. He had on a scarlet uniform coat and white duck trousers, and his hand rested on the hilt of a sword.

Glancing at this portrait, Gerald started; bending down to observe it more closely, the colour left his cheeks, and his hand trembled.

'You know the original?' asked the invalid.

'I have seen him,' faltered Gerald. 'It is, I presume, intended for Sir Geoffry Heriot.'

'Exactly,' said the invalid. 'For your father, George!'

'You know me!' cried Gerald, placing the

portrait on a table, and returning to his position by the sofa.

'Certainly, Gerald. I must call you Gerald, I could never get used to George. Certainly, I know you, Gerald!'

'Since when have you known my real name and my position, or rather,' he added bitterly, 'what ought to have been my position?'

'Before I ever set eyes upon you,' said the invalid; 'before I purchased those two pictures,' pointing to two sketches in oil, resting on one of the cabinets, 'which were not great triumphs of art, as you will allow, my dear Gerald, but which it suited me then to pay well for.'

'And all this time that I have been living on your bounty, as it were, you knew that I was an impostor; that the name under which I passed was not my own; the story which I told you of my previous life was a fiction.'

'You use harsh language in speaking of yourself, Gerald,' said the invalid. 'If you had not been who you are, I should have

taken no interest in you or your fortune. You cannot suppose, for you are not a vain boy, that a sensible old woman like myself was idiotic enough to have fallen in love with you, and to take an interest in you for your *beaux yeux*. You cannot imagine that, true worldling as I am, I was actuated by philanthropy, or any preposterous motive of that kind, to adopt a young person whom I had never seen, to make him my companion and my heir. No, when I saw you, I liked your appearance and manner; when I came to know you, I learned to love you as my own child; but what induced me in the first instance to send for you—and when I sent for you it was with the determination to hold to you, if you had been as bad as you are good, to give you position, if you had been as totally unfitted as you are totally fitted for it—was the knowledge that you were Geoffry Heriot's discarded son, and that all good fortune accruing to you would be, when he knows it—as he will! as he shall! sooner or later!—gall and wormwood to Geoffry Heriot!"

Gerald had sat open-eyed, regarding with wonder the fire which blazed in her eyes, and the expression of hatred and contempt which swept across her face at each mention of his father's name.

'You speak very harshly of Sir Geoffry Heriot,' he said, after a pause.

'I speak harshly because I hate him, but I hate him because I have cause.'

'He must have known you well to have had the opportunity of raising such resentment in you?'

'I knew him too well; he embittered the whole current of my life; he—there is no need for any farther mysteries, Gerald,' she said, with an effort to calm herself. 'I was always waiting for some chance of your hearing my maiden name mentioned in the world, when you would have at once understood the source of my interest in you; but it is so long since I was a girl, and so long since I have been known as Mrs. Entwistle, that people seemed to forget I was once Florence Hastings!'

'Hastings! that was my mother's name,' said Gerald quickly, with a beating heart. 'Was she related to you?'

'She was my sister,' said Mrs. Entwistle quietly.

CHAPTER VII.

PRIVATE AND CONFIDENTIAL.

An hour before the revelation made to Gerald Hardinge by Mrs. Entwistle, Doctor Asprey stood in his own hall watching Mr. Delabole, who was taking his hat and light over-coat from the servant.

'What has become of Vane?' asked the great capitalist.

'He has gone back to the dining-room to look for a pencil with which he had been making some memoranda, and which he has left behind him. By the way, Mr. Delabole,' continued the doctor, 'our friend has, to say the least of it, a certain infirmity of temper. His manner just now, when I was compelled,

according to my invariable practice, to refuse him permission to smoke, was almost offensive.'

'You took it remarkably well, I must say, my dear doctor; but the fact is, our friend, as you know perfectly, has taken a little too much of your very excellent claret, and is scarcely responsible for his sayings and doings.'

'Perhaps so,' said Doctor Asprey, 'but that doesn't better his conduct in my eyes. I don't pretend, at all events to you, to be squeamish about such matters, but I have a contempt for a man who takes too much wine, and a special contempt for one who is quarrelsome in his cups. *In vino veritas* is a perfectly trustworthy saying; and a man whom good wine turns into a savage is, depend upon it, both undesirable and unreliable as a friend.'

'What you say applies generally without doubt,' said Mr. Delabole, 'though I think you are a little mistaken in the present instance. This conquest of Mrs. Bendixen is a

great triumph for Vane, and he is just a thought *tête montée* over it.'

'The expression is clever and refined,' said the doctor; 'but the English equivalent strikes me as being much more applicable in the present instance. Of such a man, they say in the vernacular, that he "cannot stand beans," and that appears to me graphically descriptive of Mr. Vane's condition. Success has made him insolent, even to those who helped him on his upward path.'

'It still lies within the resources of science to double him up, as the Chicken remarked of Mr. Dombey,' said Mr. Delabole, with a pleasant smile. 'Until that necessity arrives, and so long as he is useful, we will treat him well. Here he is. Now, Philip, the night air, even mild as it is at present, not being particularly beneficial to the health of three hundred guinea brougham horses, perhaps you won't mind hurrying yourself a bit.'

'I have been after my pencil-case,' said Vane; 'it had rolled under the table, and I had an awful bother to get at it.'

'It would have been perfectly safe,' said the doctor, who seemed to find it impossible to get over his annoyance, 'and the servants would have been certain to find it in the morning.'

'I wouldn't have let it spend a night under this roof for anything,' said Vane, with a thick laugh; 'its habit of truth would have deteriorated, and it would have written nothing but humbugging prescriptions, or—'

'There now, come along,' said Mr. Delabole, seizing his friend's arm, and hurrying him past the grave servant in black, who stood by the street-door.

'Good-night, doctor. I shall be glad to learn how matters progress in the Palace Gardens district, if you will take an opportunity of calling upon me in the City.'

Whatever sobering influence the calm night air had upon Philip Vane, its effect in sweetening his temper was very small indeed. He puffed angrily and in silence at the cigar which he had lit immediately on entering his friend's brougham, and when he addressed

himself to speech, it was only to reiterate the complaints to which Mr. Delabole had already referred.

'What infernal affectation that is in Asprey,' he growled, 'not letting people smoke in his place; might as well be at one's maiden aunt's in the country, where one has to go into the kitchen after the servants are gone to bed, and puff up the chimney.'

'It's because there are so many people of the maiden aunt class, who of necessity visit his house, that the doctor is compelled to be strict. He couldn't possibly have delicate patients coming into a place reeking of tobacco.'

'O, of course,' said Philip Vane sullenly, 'that is always the way now. It is only necessary for me to object to anything that a fellow says or does, for you to become his warmest supporter and most enthusiastic admirer. Now I tell you—'

'Now I tell you,' said Mr. Delabole, as the carriage stopped, 'here we are. Will you come in and have a drink, or shall the brougham take you home?'

'I will come in and have a talk,' said Philip Vane ungraciously; 'there are one or two business matters upon which I particularly wish to speak to you.'

'All right; in with you,' said Mr. Delabole, and with a half-smile and a half-shrug he opened the street-door with his latch-key, and gave his companion admittance.

Mr. Delabole lived in Piccadilly, on the first floor of a large house, the whole of which was let out as chambers. His rooms, handsome in themselves, were handsomely fitted and furnished in what was perhaps a somewhat florid style, but that was the taste of the upholsterer rather than of Mr. Delabole, who, however, found no fault with it. There was a drop of Hebraic blood in Mr. Delabole's veins (the maiden name of his mother, Mrs. Munker, long since deceased, was Rachael Hart, and her residence before marriage Cutler-street, Houndsditch, where her father kept the Net of Lemons), which made him delight in bright colours of rich and gaudy patterns. Everything was just a little overdone: the

antique furniture was too old; you waded up to your ankles in the soft velvet pile carpet, and the tall lamps, standing here and there, were so shaded, that all those portions of the room not immediately within their focus were in perfect darkness.

There was plenty of light, however, on a small table laid out with the materials for a choice cold supper, and bearing a handsome stand of spirit decanters. Mr. Vane, entering the room before his host, advanced to this table, smiled contemptuously as he glanced at it, and threw himself into an easy-chair by its side.

'Quite right, my dear Philip,' said Mr. Delabole, bustling into the room; 'glad to see you seated at the table; no sensible man goes to bed without something to act as a stay in case he should happen to have one of those confounded fits of waking in the night, no matter how good a dinner he may have eaten. You are going to try a spoonful of that mayonnaise, a morsel of that Roquefort?'

'Not I,' said Philip; 'it is not every one

who can afford to play with his digestion, or his figure, as you can.'

'Ah! I forgot,' said Mr. Delabole pleasantly, 'I am not going to be married to a rich and handsome widow, and to the ladies I adore a spoonful of salad or a crumb of cheese will not make much difference. But you will drink something, I suppose?'

'Yes; what's become of your man, the foreigner?'

'Fritz? He's gone to bed—why?'

'O, nothing; I only thought I should like a glass of beer; I suppose, though, he would have been too much of a fine gentleman to fetch it?'

'My dear fellow, I am not too much of a fine gentleman, at all events. I would run round to the public-house and fetch it myself.'

'Don't be an ass, Delabole. It would have been a grand thing though to have seen the great millionaire with a pewter pot in his hand, in the middle of Piccadilly. No, I'll have some brandy; it will be better for me.'

He rose as he spoke, and pouring out more

than half a tumbler of raw spirit, swallowed a large portion of it, and then filled up the tumbler with iced water.

'I wanted that to pull me together,' he said, smacking his lips; 'not that I failed in doing justice to the doctor's wine; but when one is a little out of sorts, wine somehow doesn't seem enough, and one wants the grip which brandy gives.'

'You can't be out of sorts, surely,' said Delabole.

'Nothing really the matter, only a little upset, that is all.' His voice was growing a little thick, and he sat glaring before him in a half-stolid, half-defiant manner.

'By the way, what did you think of Gerald Hardinge?' said Delabole, turning upon him suddenly, and closely observing the effect of his question.

Philip Vane's bloodshot eyes gleamed savagely, as he said:

'I hate him!'

'That's a strong sentiment to be roused by a man whom you have never seen before, isn't

it? Particularly in you, who are generally such a remarkably cool customer. I suppose, however, that there is hate, as well as love, "at first sight," though I confess I don't see what there is to call forth any such feeling toward Mr. Hardinge.'

'He's a bumptious, swaggering young idiot,' said Vane sullenly.

'No, not quite all that,' said Mr. Delabole. 'He is bumptious, and swaggering, and young, I admit; but the two first simply result from the last. It is the tendency of youth to swagger. I was very objectionable in that way myself, as a boy, and I can fancy that even you, my dear Philip, were not the most retiring lad in your school.'

'Well, I am not going to chop words with you,' said Vane. 'I repeat what I said, I hate this fellow!'

'Do you know, I begin to think, Philip, that you are jealous of Mr. Hardinge.'

'Jealous!' cried Vane, springing forward from his chair. 'What do you mean by that? how could I be jealous of him?'

'What an excitable party it is to-night!' said Mr. Delabole quietly. 'Don't you recollect Asprey's telling us about this young fellow whispering to Mrs. Bendixen, and paying her great court one evening when you were not present?'

'O!' said Vane, lying back with an air of relief, 'I remember, now you mention it, but I had forgotten all about it. No,' he added with a scornful laugh, 'I'm not jealous; I stand too well in that quarter to fear any rival.' And his fingers began playing with the locket on his watch-guard.

Mr. Delabole had never removed his eyes from his companion during this little colloquy. At its conclusion he said:

'Well, whatever cause your dislike springs from, you must not let it influence your manner toward this young man. It was to his guardian, or godmother, or whoever the old woman is that he lives with, that Asprey was sent for during dinner. He told me so in the hall, and said that the old lady had had a very narrow squeak for it this time, and that un-

questionably her ticket is taken for the down line. When she starts on that journey, our young friend comes into all the money.'

'And a nice use he'll make of it,' sneered Philip Vane.

'A nice use *we* shall make of it, my dear Philip,' said Mr. Delabole, with a light laugh. 'For if I can carry out my idea, most of that worthy old person's savings will come to the Terra del Fuegos, or some of our other ventures. Therefore, as I was just saying, there is every reason why you should not permit the feelings with which you say you regard this young man to influence your manner towards him. He is by no means an idiot, as you suppose, and was quite sharp enough to perceive the unpleasant impression which he had created in you.'

'All right,' said Vane sullenly. 'I'll take care of that. You never saw me blunder in business, and if this is put to me as a matter of business, I shall, of course, not import my private feelings into it. Now I think I'll go home.'

'Stay one minute,' said Mr. Delabole, who perceived that the effects of the drink had gone off; 'I find I must get a few days' change of air, and there are two or three things which I want to say to you before I go.'

'O! you are going at once, are you?' said Vane. 'All right; as we cannot both be conveniently away at the same time, it will suit me better that you should go now than later.'

'I'm glad of that,' said Mr. Delabole.

'I didn't mean anything,' said Vane, reddening at the sarcastic inflection of his friend's voice. 'I'm not a swaggerer like young Hardinge. Only Mrs. Bendixen is going down next week to stop with some friends in the Isle of Wight, and I have an invitation to the same house. That's all.'

'I shall be back by that time, and you shall go and do your courtship at your leisure, my dear Philip. By the way, when is the marriage to come off?'

'About the beginning of September, I suppose; that will be my first chance of a clear

fortnight. She talks about a month, but I couldn't stand that.'

'No, of course not. And where are you going to live?'

'There is a house of hers in Curzon-street, which will be vacant at Christmas, and upon which she seems to have set her mind. We shall stay at an hotel, I suppose, until the place is done up and refurnished, and that kind of thing.'

'Curzon-street will be handy for Hardinge, who lives close by. We must not, however, commence operations in that quarter until we see what is going to become of the old woman, who, by Asprey's account, is marvellously sharp, and might put the young fellow on his guard. Now let me talk to you about Irving's matter.'

'Irving? O, the Indian man.'

'Exactly, the Indian man! Gillman has been making some particular inquiries about Irving. It appears that he was a struggling man in Calcutta, junior partner in a mer-

chant's house, adding very slowly to the capital which he had embarked in the firm, and almost tempted to withdraw his money and return to England. One day a man came to him, bearing a letter of introduction from a common acquaintance, a Lieutenant in a native regiment, with a proposition for some wild speculation in indigo or cotton—I don't know which—which required capital to float it. This capital the visitor asked Irving to supply, pointing out to him at the same time fairly enough, that though the risk was very great, the profits, if successful, would be in proportion. Young Irving was almost at desperation point then, and after a little deliberation he agreed to find the money, and the speculation was launched. By this single *coup* Irving became a rich man, and then, as is nearly always the case, luck seemed to stick to him. But in a strange superstitious kind of way—he is a Scotchman—he always connected the young Lieutenant, who introduced the speculator to him, with his good luck, and

took care to connect him with all the schemes in which he himself embarked in the future.'

'Not a bad thing for the Lieutenant.'

'A very good thing, for Irving looked upon him as a kind of guardian angel, and more than once refused to be mixed up with operations which his soldier-friend regarded suspiciously. Nor was it a bad thing for Irving, for the Lieutenant was naturally a keen, clear-headed fellow, and owed his advance in life much more to his own brains than to Irving's assistance.'

'And are they both alive? and does the alliance still continue?'

'Yes, to both questions. They are both alive; but young Irving, who adventured his few hundreds, is old Mr. Irving, of Combe Park, Surrey, and Marine Villa, Torquay, bank director, and one of the richest commoners in England. While the Lieutenant is Sir Geoffry Heriot, K.C.B., retired general officer.'

'And you are telling me this story,' said Philip, yawning, '*apropos* of—'

'*Apropos* of our getting Irving to join us in the direction of the Terra del Fuegos. Gillman seems convinced that it can only be managed with Sir Geoffry Heriot's sanction and concurrence.'

'And how is that to be obtained?'

'By representing to Sir Geoffry himself the stability of the concern and the desirability of his taking shares in it.'

'It is worth while throwing out a sprat for the sake of hooking such a fine salmon as this Mr. Irving. Why not tell Sir Geoffry that so many shares, now at such and such a premium, have been placed at his private disposal?'

'Simply because that would be the exact way to defeat our object! When I was a young man, many years ago, a friend told me a story which I have never forgotten. His father was a banker at Athens. At the principal hotel there arrived a Frenchman, a magnifico, a duke with an historical name. He lived splendidly; his retinue was most numerous; he gave superb entertainments.

After he had been at the hotel about a month, he one day called upon my friend's father, asking if the firm would cash a bill, which he would draw on his bankers in Paris. My friend's father had heard of the duke's pomp and magnificence, had seen some of the outward signs of his luxury in the number and splendour of his servants. But in business he was a cautious man. Why did not the duke bring an introduction to him from the French ambassador? The duke laughed scornfully. Was it likely that he, a descendant of Clovis, would condescend to enter into any relations with such *canaille* as an ambassador sent from the Republic then existing in France? The banker did not reply. He was just turning round to instruct his head-cashier to discount the bill at the current rate when the duke said: "Give me twenty thousand piastres now, and I will give you my bill for twenty-five thousand payable in a fortnight." In an instant the banker saw the style of man he had to deal with. In an instant he closed his desk,

put the keys in his pocket, and saying, "That is not our method of doing business," bowed his visitor out. The next day the duke was arrested as a swindling impostor. Memo. Never offer too much, lest your motives be suspected.'

'You're right,' said Philip Vane, 'and I can't conceive why I made the suggestion, except that I am dropping with sleep, and very weak-minded in consequence.'

'I will release you in two minutes. All you have to do is this. During my absence you will receive a farther report from Gillman. If in it he says that Sir Geoffry Heriot's influence over Mr. Irving still continues, and that the old gentleman declines to move in our matter without consulting his friend, you must find out Sir Geoffry's address, and—'

'And let you know?'

'That will be impossible, dear boy, I shall be out of town.'

'But you will leave your address?'

'Not exactly,' said Mr. Delabole play-

fully. 'I don't want to be worried with business matters while I'm away. Other people want a little quiet as well as you, Master Philip. No, what you have to do is to find out Sir Geoffry's address, and tell Gillman, whom, as far as regards that matter, I will place entirely at your disposal, to make himself acquainted with the old General's friends, mode of life, &c. He knows exactly what to do. Thus, all the preparation will be made and ready for me to work upon when I return to town.'

'And if there is a necessity for seeing this old Sir What-you-call-him, who may live at the extremity of England, or on the Continent, or anywhere else, who will have to do that?'

'You, undoubtedly, my dear Philip. That appertains to the general manager's department, and I believe you receive the general manager's salary and perquisites.'

'As at present arranged, certainly, but—but—however, we need not discuss the matter farther, just now. You may depend upon

my doing all that is necessary. Now, good-night and good-bye.'

'Stay, let me see you to the door; the lock is awkward for those unaccustomed to it.'

So saying, Mr. Delabole followed his guest down the staircase, and saw him safely into the street.

Returning to his room, the luxurious proprietor mixed himself a little cold brandy-and-water, lit a final cigarette, and commenced to moralise.

'Wonderfully clever man of the world, Asprey! What he said of our dear friend, who has just vacated that chair, that he "could not stand beans," is exactly and mathematically correct! Curzon-street and Mrs. Bendixen, and her sixty thousand pounds, have been too much for him! He means to kick over the traces, and he shows signs of it already. That was what he meant by his recent hesitation. When he has secured that prize, he thinks that he will be independent of me and of the Terra del Fuegos,

and can hold or leave his position with us as it may happen to please him. Not so fast, Mr. Philip Vane, not quite so fast, if you please! There are such things as slips between cups and lips, and with those who have the opportunity of putting spokes in wheels rests the amount of progress to be achieved. Let me see what I can do in that capacity.'

As he spoke he rose from his seat, flung the butt-end of his cigarette into the empty fireplace, and crossing the room, seated himself at a large old-fashioned writing-table. Opening one of the drawers, he took from it a memorandum-book, bound in leather, and secured with a lock. Opening this again with a gold key, hanging amidst a bunch of charms on his watch-chain, he turned over the leaves rapidly until he stopped at a certain page.

'There it is,' he said, 'my first and only essay in the detective profession, which, for an amateur, was decidedly successful. How wise I was not to trust to my memory for the detail, and how grateful I ought to be

to old Wuff, that the casual reference to him and his travelling company, that morning at the club, should have been the means of giving me a tight hold over one of the most slippery but most useful tools ever yet fashioned for my hand! "Miss Madge Pierrepoint, leading lady, Wexeter Theatre, Dobson, manager. Ultra-respectable, not a breath heard. Lodges with younger sister at Miss Cave's, box-book keeper in Crescent. Supposed to be spooned on by Gerald Hardinge, scene-painter at theatre. N.B. Nothing known of him, supposed to be swell out of luck. Tall woman, brown hair, large eyes, walks well." Walks well! Lord, ah! I shall never forget the day that I walked after her and her sister from the theatre, when I wanted to take stock of her in the daylight, and how she looked me up and down when she found I was following them as though she were a princess! I didn't like that, I recollect; I found the detective lay wasn't in my line, and left the rest of the clearing of it up to Gillman. Here is his report. "Miss

Madge Pierrepoint, leading lady at the Chepstow Theatre, manager, W. Mew. Extract from the visitors' book of the Chepstow Castle Hotel : Arrivals, May the 17th, — Mund, Esquire, Mrs. and Mast., London ; Wugg, Major, Southsea; Crumpsall, Mrs., Manchester ; Vane, Captain, London. Extract from marriage-register in Chepstow parish church : July the 3d. This is to certify, &c. Margaret Pierrepoint, spinster ; Philip Vane, bachelor. Witnesses, Thomas Black, fisherman; Helen Black, pew-opener." That will do for my dear Philip, I think! That will prove a curb even for his restive temper. Not merely shall he do exactly what I require him, but through this "information which I have received," I shall be enabled to show him the best way of investing Mrs. Bendixen's sixty thousand pounds!'

CHAPTER VIII.

THE NEWSPAPER PARAGRAPH.

The discovery which Madge Pierrepoint had made—that Gerald Hardinge, who had been so madly in love with her, and George Heriot, Sir Geoffry's discarded son, were one and the same man—not merely rendered her more than ever desirous of effecting a reconciliation between parent and child, but sent her thoughts wandering back to those old times from dwelling on which she had hitherto successfully tried to preserve them.

In her reminiscences of the time passed at Wexeter, Philip Vane played no conspicuous part. On her first arrival at Springside, Madge had been accustomed to think of her husband with feelings of horror for his misdeeds, and of affright lest he should again ap-

pear before her. As time wore on she made acquaintances in the new place of her sojourn, and busied herself in their society and in her employment, so that her opportunities for self-communion were few, and when her mind turned upon Philip Vane she found herself thinking of him as of a nightmare under which she had once suffered, and the influence of which had not entirely passed away.

But now, when in any such leisure moments as she could steal for herself (and they were but few, for with her return Sir Geoffry had resumed his old habits, and was eager as ever for her companionship), she sat musing over her life in Miss Cave's lodgings, only one thought in connection with Philip Vane crossed her mind, and that was one of pity for any woman whom he might have married. For he must have married again; she had little doubt of that; he had hinted as much in their last interview. Well, what was that to her? The idea did not cause her the smallest emotion of any kind. So that Philip Vane kept clear of her, nothing that he did could

have the slightest influence upon her, and she dismissed him from her thoughts as though he had never been.

But Gerald? The sight of the sketch, and its association with the scene which he had painted, had brought about a recurrence of those feelings with which she used to regard him, softened and purified, perhaps, although, in good truth, there was little need for it, by time. She loved to think of him, bright and high-spirited, taking his work as though it were a pleasure, and ever ready to break off to do her some slight service, to give a drawing lesson to Rose. Gerald's honour had been a constant subject of laudatory talk, not unmixed with astonishment, to his impecunious and somewhat shifty companions. Poor as he was, he had never been known to borrow a farthing, and generally managed to help those whose need was greater than his own. So tenacious was he of his self-respect, that it was with great difficulty he was ever induced to enter a public-house. Clever, brave—Madge remembered how on the occasion of a

picnic, he had jumped into a lock on the Wex, and saved the life of a child which had fallen overboard from the boat—handsome and energetic, he had all the qualities which parents were usually so proud to see in their children. What could have caused this severance between Sir Geoffry and his son? It must have been a bitter quarrel, and one which, Madge thought, as she scrutinised the old man's features, and marked the hard look in his eyes and the severe lines round his mouth, one which would be hard to heal.

When she at first heard of the state of affairs from the sufficiently reticent Captain Cleethorpe, she had determined on doing her best to effect this reconciliation, but she hesitated now. Would it not be thought, when it came to be discovered—as it would, as it must—that she and Sir Geoffry's son were old acquaintances, that her motives were more than open to a suspicion of selfishness, and that her exertions had really been made for the purpose of bringing her old lover back to her feet? Would Gerald not think so him-

self? He was generous, she knew, but she also knew that he was rash and impulsive, and, from the glimpse of his behaviour at the mention of her name, which Rose's letter had afforded her, she imagined that he still remembered her abrupt desertion of him with bitterness. Moreover, the mere fact of there having been any previous acquaintance between them would render it doubly hard to deal with Sir Geoffry, who, notwithstanding his undoubted regard for her, was as wrong-headed and as likely to jump at false conclusions as any of his neighbours.

It seemed as though she were destined to be self-reliant and self-contained through life. At each crisis of her career (and there had been times when, on the steps then taken, her whole future rested) she had always had to depend upon her own judgment, and in this last strait there was no one to whom she could apply for counsel.

Captain Cleethorpe, always kind, always gentlemanly, and desirous of advancing her interests, was nevertheless unpractical and

rather slow of comprehension. Mr. Drage, with the influence he had recently acquired over Sir Geoffry, would be the best man to aid her in her purpose, but he would then think that on the former occasion of her confidence with him, she had only told him half her story; nor did she believe that he, good man though he was, would be particularly anxious to aid in introducing into the family circle at Wheatcroft a young man, who had once been passionately devoted to the lady then acting as housekeeper there.

And that comprised her list of trustworthy friends; she had numerous acquaintances, pleasant people enough in their way, wishing her well, kind and neighbourly in their behaviour towards her, but not people whom she could consult in any matter of business, much less intrust with an important secret such as this. Madge felt that, in any other matter, Sir Geoffry himself would have been the best person to appeal to, and, indeed, at one time she had made up her mind to speak out and tell him frankly of the dis-

covery which she had made by means of the sketch, and of the circumstances under which in earlier life she had met with his discarded son. Who but she could bear witness to Gerald's honour and uprightness, to his industry and kind-heartedness, to the patient long-suffering with which he kept the secret of his altered position, and the cheerfulness with which he earned his hard living in the comparatively humble sphere to which, by the quarrel with his father, he had been relegated? But, on farther thought, Madge determined to alter her plan of action, and resolved to sound Sir Geoffry before taking any definite steps.

An opportunity for so doing came unexpectedly. One morning Captain Cleethorpe arrived at Wheatcroft earlier than his wont. There were few days on which the Captain failed to put in an appearance for a chat with Sir Geoffry, generally bringing with him the latest gossip from the club, or some Indian journal with news of persons or places known to the old General. But on this occa-

sion, the breakfast things were still on the table when the Captain was seen cantering up the avenue. Ordinarily, if his first inquiry were not for Mrs. Pickering, he invariably took an opportunity of seeing her on his way to Sir Geoffry's sanctum; but on this particular morning, though the door of her room was open, Captain Cleethorpe merely nodded to her kindly but hurriedly, and passed on to the library. In the passing glance which she thus had of him, Madge noticed that there was a worn and anxious look in his face, and that his manner was preoccupied. Sir Geoffry speedily joined the Captain, and they were closeted together for about an hour. In the conversation carried on between them, their voices ran high, and although no words could be distinguished, it was evident that some matter of moment was under discussion. Madge, who had been rather frightened at these outward signs of a storm, was pleased, when the discussion was at an end, and the two gentlemen emerged from the study, to see them shake hands in their usual friendly way

at the hall-door; but Captain Cleethorpe's countenance still wore a distressed look, while Sir Geoffry was flushed and agitated.

When the door was closed, and Captain Cleethorpe had ridden away, the General turned back into the house, and asked Madge to send him a glass of wine. There was something in her look which caused him to say:

'You are surprised at such a request from me, Mrs. Pickering, and with good reason, seeing how utterly unused I am to touch anything before tiffin? But the fact is, I have been rather upset by the news which Cleethorpe brought me, and the conversation which it led up to.'

'No bad news concerning yourself, I hope, Sir Geoffry?' asked Madge, who was burning with curiosity to know what had occurred; having a faint idea that Captain Cleethorpe's visit might have had some connection with Gerald.

'No, not in the least, neither concerning me nor you, Mrs. Pickering; so for the mat-

ter of that I don't see why I need have taken any interest in it. The fact is, that Captain Cleethorpe, who is the best-hearted fellow in the world, has come to me about his servant Cooke, whom you may recollect.'

'I have seen him, I think. He has been with Captain Cleethorpe some time?'

'Certainly; came with him out of the regiment; tall, red-haired, well set-up man, most respectable in his position of life. This Cooke has a son, who is an office-lad with Drew and Dean, solicitors in the town, and it appears that of late he has fallen into bad company, neglected his duties, and was yesterday detected in some petty embezzlement.'

'How dreadful for his father!' said Madge involuntarily.

'Exactly,' said Sir Geoffry bitterly; 'that's just what I said to Captain Cleethorpe. He came here in a highly nervous state, as you must have noticed, to try and enlist my sympathies for the youth. Drew and Dean are, it appears, agents for my London solicitor, and Captain Cleethorpe had a notion that, if

I were to plead with them for the boy, they might be induced to forego the prosecution upon which at present they have decided.'

'And did you consent to plead for the boy, Sir Geoffry?'

'Most positively and decidedly not,' said the old man promptly. 'The youth has committed a crime, let him take the consequence of it. Yes. I see you look horrified; I have no doubt it is very wrong, and I feel certain that if Mr. Drage were here, that he would endeavour to show me, &c. &c. But in matters of this kind there is a touch of the pagan in me, and I hold to my text.'

'But for the sake of the poor father?'

'Ah, there your woman's wit divines what Cleethorpe had not the sharpness to perceive; for the sake of the father many persons might be induced to act as Cleethorpe asked, which is no more nor less than of "doing evil that good may come of it," but I say no. This man's life has been for the last dozen years a hard struggle, during which he has had to deny himself not merely the comforts, but

almost the necessaries of life, for the sake of rearing in respectability this boy, in the vain hope that he should find a comfort in him in his age. This hope is now blighted, but at the same time the fallacy is put an end to ; the boy must expiate his crime ; the man must cauterise the wound which has been made in his heart, and must place his affections on something else.'

'Are you quite able to judge in such a matter, Sir Geoffry ?' asked Madge, looking at him earnestly. 'Recollect the relations between the two ; recollect that you are recommending a father to sit in judgment on his son. If you were in that poor man's place could you—would you do the same ?'

'If I were in that man's place, I could and I would,' said Sir Geoffry firmly.

And Madge knew her employer sufficiently well to be certain that any attempt to plead Gerald Hardinge's cause, or any proposition for a reconciliation between him and his father, would be at that time ineffectual. Moreover, within a very short time of Captain

Cleethorpe's memorable visit to Wheatcroft, an event occurred which gave Madge but little time to devote to other people's troubles, and induced her to concentrate all her thoughts and energies on a subject with which, as she imagined, her happiness was intimately concerned.

As has previously been stated, it was Madge's practice to read aloud to Sir Geoffry on such evenings as he did not go to the club, or entertain friends at dinner, passages from books and journals with which Wheatcroft was always liberally supplied. The old General had had little time for reading in his youth, and the works of those authors who had come into vogue while he was in India were perfectly fresh to him, and from many of them he received great delight. For home politics, for what was passing in the great world of London, he cared very little; but he was always keenly alive to anything bearing on the service in which his life had been passed, and to all news from India. Sir Geoffry had very little sense of humour, and

his favourite journals were remarkable for the copiousness of their information rather than for their wit ; but probably nothing in the world had ever caused the General so much amusement, as to listen to Madge's reckless pronunciation of the Hindostanee words and Indian proper names with which her reading was studded. A hearty laugh during the whole course of his life had been almost unknown to him, and he was far too well-bred to let any woman, whatever might be her position, have an idea that she was exposing herself to ridicule ; but he suffered a martyrdom in repressing his smiles, more especially when Madge, trying, in order to please him, to get up a fictitious interest in the budget through which she was wading, would ask the meaning of some of the words which she had so abominably mispronounced.

One evening, Sir Geoffry, who had experienced rather an extra amount of enjoyment from Madge's mistakes, hearing her voice suddenly break and stop, looked up, and was surprised to find that she had fallen

back in her chair while still tightly clutching the newspaper which she had been reading. The old General jumped to his feet and hurried across the room, intending to summon assistance; but before he could reach the bell, Mrs. Pickering had sufficiently recovered to sit up, and to beg him in a low tone to take no farther notice of her indisposition, which had almost passed away.

'Passed away!' echoed the General, taking Mrs. Pickering's hand kindly between his own; 'an attack like that, under which you completely collapsed for a moment, does not pass away so quickly. I am afraid you have been over-exerting yourself, my dear Mrs. Pickering, and that I have been over-exacting in my demands on your strength.'

She said, 'No,' that it was nothing beyond a little faintness, which might have been caused by the heat of the room. She had not been well for the last few days; but she was perfectly ready to go on reading.

This, however, Sir Geoffry would not hear of. He strongly recommended Mrs. Picker-

ing to take a pint of champagne before going to bed; she was a little low, and wanted picking up, and for that, in his experience both in England and in India, there was nothing like champagne. She would not? Well, she knew best, but that was his prescription, at all events. She should certainly knock off reading for the night, and he would advise her to get to bed as soon as possible. He wished her good-night, and trusted she would not attempt to rise unless she felt herself perfectly recovered the next morning.

'Very extraordinary woman that,' said the old General, as he closed the door behind her; 'never seems to me to eat anything, and drinks as little as though she were a Scotch griff, determined to outlast all his colleagues. It is perfectly plain to me that she wants more nourishment. I must get Budd to prescribe stimulants for her; perhaps if they are ordered by him, she may be induced to take them. By the way, what was that very interesting paragraph she was reading when she was taken ill?' pursued Sir Geoffry, picking

up the fallen newspaper, and looking at it through his double glass. 'Something about exchanges, I think—no, no, this was it,' and he read the following paragraph:

'We understand that Mrs. Bendixen, widow of Andreas Bendixen, Esq., late senior partner in the well-known firm of Bendixen, Bishchoffsheim, and Kaulbach, of Calcutta and Shanghai, is about to be married to Philip Vane, Esq., formerly in the army, but well known of late in the City in connection with several successful financiering operations. The marriage will take place at the beginning of next month. Our Indian readers will not need to be reminded of the vast wealth amassed by Mr. Bendixen, a large portion of which was bequeathed to his widow.'

'Bendixen,' muttered the General to himself; 'I recollect him in Calcutta: a man of my own age, I should think. I didn't know his wife; I suppose he married after he came home. Vane, Vane? Can't be the little man with red hair that was in the Twenty-sixth?

No, his name was Tom, and he died of sunstroke. Philip Vane, known in the City? I wonder if old Sam Irving knows anything about him?' Then the General sat down and tried to continue the perusal of the papers, but he soon found himself dropping to sleep; and after a good deal of nodding and starting, he yielded the point and went off to bed.

About an hour afterwards, when perfect quiet reigned throughout the house, Madge Pierrepoint opened the door of her bedroom, stole quietly down the staircase into the library, and possessed herself of the newspaper, with which she returned in the same stealthy manner. Once in her own room again, she lighted a candle, threw a heavy cloak on the floor along the door, so that no chance rays might penetrate to the landing, and, wrapping her dressing-gown around her, sat down to read.

So she was right in her supposition that her sudden illness had not deceived her, but had itself been caused by what she had read. There it was plainly visible before her burn-

ing eyes. 'Philip Vane, formerly of the army;' there could be no doubt about it. He must have either a high opinion of her powers of endurance, or an utter contempt for her, when he could sanction the insertion of such a paragraph! She could understand the announcement well enough when the ceremony had been performed, and the whole thing settled; but to have it bruited about beforehand, when there was a chance of interference, was very unlike Philip Vane's usual discretion. Ah, she had forgotten—she, the only one woman, except the bride, interested in the intended marriage, was also the only person acquainted with the fact—a revelation of which would render the marriage impossible, and her antagonism was apparently despised. Let Philip Vane have a care; for if he were about to take this step reliant on her tolerance, or defiant of her opposition, most assuredly he had miscalculated the depths of her resentment. 'Well known for his success in the City,' the newspaper said; he was prosperous then in every way; she did not grudge him that kind

of success, but was he to marry again, glorying in his crime and announcing the value of the conquest he had made in a vulgar, vaunting paragraph, while she was to lead a solitary, celibate life, supported by her own labour, and denying herself the rest, support, and devotion which in two instances at least had been proffered to her?

He should not be suffered to carry on matters thus, with a high hand, without her making some attempt to check him, that she was determined. Accustomed as she had been for a long time to think she had schooled herself to disregard anything appertaining to Philip Vane, she was astonished to find how much and how strongly this intelligence had affected her. The old defiant spirit which at one time had been in the habit of obtaining occasional dominion over her, seemed once more aroused, and she felt that it would be impossible for her to submit herself quietly to the insult thus brought under her notice. Moreover, it was her duty to prevent this woman, whoever she might be, from being

thus sacrificed. Not that there was much fear that Philip Vane would desert a wife who brought to him riches and position, but she at least ought to be warned of what manner of man it was that sought her hand, and of the impossibility of his legally fulfilling his contract. Yes, she would act, and act at once. The thought of the calm, contemptuous manner in which her existence had been ignored by Philip Vane rendered her far more incensed against him than she was at the time of his heartless desertion of her, and nerved her to the resolution of showing him that, though up to a certain point she had accepted the terms imposed upon her, by supporting herself quietly, and leading uncomplainingly a solitary life, there was yet a measure of outrage which she would not brook.

What steps should she take? She must have advice on this point, and fortunately she was enabled to command it. Mr. Drage was acquainted with the fact of her former marriage, and to him she would appeal, telling him what news she had so strangely heard,

and asking his advice as to what would be the best course for her to pursue. Thinking it over farther, she admitted to herself that Mr. Drage's counsel was only required on a lesser point. That she would make some move in the matter, that she would assert herself, and not merely threaten, but carry out her vengeance if this marriage were proceeded with, she had determined. Anything that Mr. Drage might say in opposition to this decision, and she had some idea that he might be opposed to it, would be in vain; all she wanted of him was advice as to the best steps for her to take. Thus firmly resolved, Madge fell asleep and dreamed a pleasant dream, in which Philip Vane, who had gone into the Church, was painting a large picture, the central figures in which were Gerald Hardinge and an Indian lady, quite black, whom he had recently married.

The next morning Mr. Drage was in his study, looking through some notes for a sermon which he intended to write, when Mrs. Pickering was announced. It was not unusual

for Madge to call at the rectory to spend an hour with little Bertha, when her duties took her into the town; but Mr. Drage never saw her unexpectedly, or even heard her name mentioned, without signs of painful embarrassment. Accordingly, he advanced with flushing cheeks to greet his visitor.

'This is very kind of you, Mrs. Pickering,' said he, with outstretched hand; 'you never forget your old charge; I am sure she will be delighted to see you.'

'I have not come to see her this morning, Mr. Drage; my visit is entirely to you.'

'To me?'

'Yes, you, and you alone of all people in the world, can give me the advice which I require.'

This exordium was anything but calculated to allay the rector's perturbation.

'You recollect a conversation which we had some time since, Mr. Drage, a confession which I made to you?'

Mr. Drage bowed in acquiescence.

'Last night I received information by the

merest accident, through the medium of a newspaper paragraph, that my husband—'

'Was dead!' cried Mr. Drage, bending eagerly forward.

'Was going to be married again!' said Madge Pierrepoint.

CHAPTER IX.

SPRETÆ INJURIA FORMÆ.

The revelation which Mrs. Entwistle made to Gerald Hardinge of the relationship in which she stood towards him, was as gratifying as it was unexpected. For not merely was he fond of the woman to whom he owed his pleasant position in life, with that real affection which, springing from gratitude, is one of the purest of human passions, but, worldly philosopher as he was, he found in the announcement a balm for certain stings of conscience which had occasionally pricked him.

The fact was, that of late there had risen in Gerald Hardinge's mind a doubt whether the easy and luxurious life he was then leading, provided for by the kindness of one upon whom he had no claim of kinship, was either

an honourable or a desirable one. It was all very well at first, when the circumstances of the position were widely different. Then, smarting under a sense of degradation at his treatment by Madge Pierrepoint, he had cared little what became of him; and when he found that the patron by whom his earliest pictures were bought, and to whom the London agent introduced him immediately on his arrival, was an old lady instead of an old gentleman, as he had been led to believe, he felt it mattered but little for whom he worked, so long as he obtained adequate remuneration. The use to which the money thus acquired was to be put, varied according to his temperament. At one time he determined to spend it in searching for Madge and inducing her to reconsider her cruel determination; at another he would decide to finally abandon any farther thought of his quondam sweetheart, and only hope that some day, seeing him in his glory, she might be able to form some idea of what she had lost by her treacherous conduct.

Then came the time when, taking up his

abode in Mrs. Entwistle's house (temporarily, as it was understood, for the purpose of elaborating some drawings under her personal superintendence), he gradually suffered Madge to fade out of his thoughts, and becoming by degrees accustomed to his new life, taught himself the facile creed, that Art is a coy goddess, declining to appear whenever she may be invoked, and only rendering herself visible at certain times and seasons, not to be calculated upon beforehand. This meant, of course, nothing more nor less than that being brought into constant contact with nothing-doing people, with time and money at their disposal, Gerald had become inoculated with the charm of the lives they led, and that he only resorted to his canvas and brushes in default of more pleasant pastime. In this idleness he was encouraged by Mrs. Entwistle, who gradually inducted him into the position of her representative during her lifetime, her heir after her death, and by the examples of his companions, who could not understand any other mode of life than that which they led.

Nevertheless, from time to time a feeling of shame crept over him as he remembered how actively he had been engaged at his outset in life, when his very existence depended on his own exertions, and when he contrasted the hard-won independence of those days with the purposeless and easy life which he now led. And so far had those feelings wrought upon him, that he had come to a resolution, the first-fruits of which were visible in his remonstrance with Mrs. Entwistle, against her declared intention of leaving him all her property.

A naturally indolent young man, who has for some time been accustomed to have all his wishes fulfilled without any cost or trouble to himself, is, however, a bad subject for self-reform, and it is probable that Gerald Hardinge would have salved his conscience with the fact of his kinship to his benefactor being sufficient excuse for his position in her house, had not his mind been entirely taken up with another subject springing out of the same revelation. His mother! Here at last was an

opportunity, for which he had sought so often when first driven from his father's roof, but which of late years he had completely forgotten, of endeavouring to learn the history of his mother's early married life, and of ridding her memory of the stigma attached to it by his father. That, if it could be carried out, would be something, indeed, to live for, and Gerald determined on learning how far Mrs. Entwistle could help him in his research on the first available opportunity.

On the morning of the day after that on which he dined with Doctor Asprey, Gerald went for his usual ride, and asking on his return after Mrs. Entwistle, was surprised to learn that she had risen, and had been wheeled into the boudoir, according to her usual custom.

'She had been perfectly quiet through the night,' Willis observed, and declared 'that she felt no worse than usual from the sharp attack on the previous evening.' In her boudoir, at the window overlooking the park, Gerald found her. Her back was towards the

door, but she recognised his footstep at once, and there was a smile on her face as he stooped down to kiss her forehead.

'You are none the worse for last night's attack, Willis tells me,' said Gerald tenderly.

'By some extraordinary and inexplicable accident, Willis is right,' said Mrs. Entwistle; 'either my system is becoming so accustomed to attacks that I am beginning to thrive upon them, as some persons are said to do upon poisons, or what would have been the ill effects of the shock last night were counteracted by the excessive amount of amusement which I experienced.'

'Amusement?'

'Amusement, and created by you, or rather by the conversation which we had. I cannot imagine anything more utterly ridiculous, except upon the stage, than our talk last evening and its climax, though I am afraid I spoiled the effect of that by my unfortunate want of strength! I ought to have risen from the sofa, and flinging my arms open for you to rush into, exclaimed, "Be-

hold your long-lost aunt!" But there is something in the very name and character of "aunt," which would render any attempt at romance impossible in the most determined heroine, to say nothing of such a very matter-of-fact person as myself.'

'I am glad you were amused,' said Gerald quietly. 'You had the advantage, you see, of being acquainted with all the hidden mystery, and of enjoying my surprise at its announcement. For my own part my feelings were not entirely of an amused character.'

'You surely did not find anything to be sentimental over in the discovery of your aunt?' said Mrs. Entwistle, looking at him maliciously.

'No,' replied Gerald, 'but my aunt, if you recollect, spoke of my mother.'

'Ah, you were fond of your mother, I believe?'

'Fond of her!' echoed Gerald; 'she was your sister, you say? Were you not fond of her?'

'No,' said Mrs. Entwistle quietly. 'At

one time, yes; but for many years before her death, certainly not. Fondness for people is a mistake which one grows out of in years; the last person I was fond of was myself, but that delusion died away long since.'

'And yet you are fond of me?' said Gerald.

'A weakness of old age, my dear,' said Mrs. Entwistle, 'and one which, having so few, I can afford to encourage.'

Gerald noticed and appreciated the tones in which these words were uttered.

'It seems to me so strange that any one could have disliked my mother,' said he, half unconsciously.

'I didn't positively dislike her,' said Mrs. Entwistle. 'My feelings towards her were of a negative character. I didn't like her, and I had my reasons!'

'From what you said last night, you must also have had your reasons for disliking my father.'

'I had my reasons for hating your father!' said Mrs. Entwistle, with sudden energy, 'and

I have them still. There was never much of the angel in my composition, but what little there was, he obliterated. What I might have been had I not met Geoffry Heriot, I know not; but that I am as I am, cynical, hard, unforgiving, and unbelieving, is his work!'

'You still continue to make me half-confidences,' said Gerald; 'to speak to me of results without explaining the causes. Why not tell me about my father and yourself in early life, and the story of what he did to make you hate him so cordially?'

'You are afflicted with an insatiable curiosity, my dear Gerald, and, after my announcement to you of last evening, seem to look upon me as a kind of mystery-monger, with constantly startling surprises in store. As you are pleased to ask for a story, I do not know that mine would satisfy you: it would be merely the narration of a sufficiently ordinary set of incidents, with perhaps a somewhat uncommon *dénouement* (that I think is the correct word), and I must again apologise for my weakness, which prevents my pulling

my chair and sitting down close by you in the true dramatic manner.'

'If the story, or whatever you choose to call it, concerns my mother, it is sure to have interest for me,' said Gerald earnestly, purposely ignoring the latter portion of Mrs. Entwistle's speech.

'It concerns your father more than your mother,' said Mrs. Entwistle; 'but I think you will find that, like most persons who get an opportunity of narration, I make myself the principal heroine of the adventures. Why I permitted any farther reference to the subject at all,' she added, after a pause, 'I cannot understand, except it is that you seem interested, and it may be as well to let the real facts of the case be known while I am capable of stating them; but please let it be perfectly understood, that this is nothing in the light of a death-bed confession, or, indeed, of a repentance of any kind. What I did was done with my eyes open, and I am not sure that it would not be repeated exactly in the same way, under similar circumstances.'

Gerald marked her rising colour and flashing eyes.

'Will not the excitement of talking be too much for you?' he said, bending over her, and taking her hand.

'No,' she replied, with a half-laugh; 'you have brought it upon yourself, and must now go through with it. Only I should like my hand to remain in yours while you listen to me.

'You were too young during your mother's lifetime to have understood anything about this, even if she had chosen to tell you; so I will begin at the beginning. She and I were the only children of a man high up in one of the government offices. Our mother died when we were quite little tots (there was but a year's difference between my sister and myself), and my only recollection of her is in connection with a big oil-painting, where she was represented looking on in simpering delight at her children gambolling with a big black retriever dog, while her husband loaded a gun in the background. All this, with the

exception of the black dog, was the result of pure imagination on the part of the artist. Our mother never had health enough to look after us in our playtime, and our father certainly never loaded or fired a gun in his life. He was a small, studious man of a scientific turn, who cordially hated his official work, save for the money which it brought to him, and who passed all his leisure in making chemical experiments.

'Nor do I remember that there was ever the amount of affection between your mother and myself, indicated by the entwined arms and loving glances in the family portrait. At the time of the execution of that wonderful work of art, we were both plain children, though of a different plainness. Your mother's hair was light, her features heavy, her figure squab and clumsy, whereas my hair was black, my complexion sallow, and my limbs thin and ungainly. We had but little in common even then; she was sluggish and apathetic, I impulsive and intolerant. As we grew up together, our characters remained

pretty much as they had been, but as regards outward appearance, not merely did each improve wonderfully, but there was found to be a great amount of similarity between us. We were exactly of the same height; my figure had filled out until it closely resembled your mother's; our walk, our mode of carrying ourselves, our accustomed gestures, were exactly the same; we usually dressed alike, and the general resemblance, even to the voices, was so great, that to tell which was Miss Emma and which Miss Florence, was pronounced impossible, unless our faces were plainly visible.

'When we were respectively seventeen and eighteen years old our father died, leaving just enough to keep us and no more, and recommending us to the tender mercy of his sister, a maiden lady, who lived at Stonechester. She was a pleasant, kindly old woman, and accepted the charge thus bequeathed to her in the most affectionate spirit, although the addition of two young women to her modest little household must have greatly de-

ranged her comfort. Miss Hastings was highly thought of in the cathedral society to which her nieces were at first voted a charming addition. I am bound to say that your mother always retained the good opinion of these humdrum folk, which, for my part, I speedily lost; I used to quiz the canons, and curates, and all the rest of them, and flirted unmercifully with the military men who occasionally drifted into our midst from Chatham and Brompton barracks.

'One night, I recollect it as well as if it were yesterday, there was a little musical party at the deanery. At first I did not intend to go, thinking it would be dull and prosy; but I was over-persuaded, and I went. We were a little late, and on our arrival found that the singing had already commenced. A man's voice, strange to me then, but from that hour never forgotten, was sighing forth the last notes of Edgar Ravenswood's farewell to his lost love. We stood spell-bound. I have heard this air sung by all the great tenors of my time, better and more accurately sung,

doubtless, but never with the same effect. The voice we listened to then was low and clear, but its specialty was the wonderfully sympathetic quality of its tones; the heart-broken despair trembling in every note of the lover's wail. When the air was concluded there was a burst of applause, unusually loud for that decorous assemblage; and as we entered the room I saw the hostess warmly congratulating a gentleman, whom I rightly imagined to be the singer.

'There was nothing particularly remarkable in his appearance, save that he wore a moustache, or, as it was then called, "a pair of moustachios," an ornament rarely cultivated by Englishmen. He was of average height, with dark eyes and flowing dark hair; a trim figure and dainty hands and feet. His age must have been about eight-and-thirty, for though considerably younger than the Dean, of whom he was some distant connection, he had been for a short time contemporary with him both at Harrow and Cambridge. Since his university days Mr. Yeldham, that

was his name, had principally resided abroad, having an independence of his own, and being devoted to music and painting, both of which arts he practised as an amateur. After a little time he was asked to sing again, and I was introduced to him to act as his accompanist. This time choosing a simple English ballad—one of Dibdin's, I remember—he created even a greater amount of enthusiasm, and when he bent down to thank me for my assistance, I felt that a new era in my life had begun.

'How absurd it must seem to you to hear me, an old woman, talking in this strain! I myself see the absurdity of it, and yet I can perfectly recollect the glamour which possessed me, the beatific state in which I lived when in that man's company! You must try and picture me to yourself as I was, not as I am, if you would realise all I have to say. He seemed pleased with me, and sat by me for some time. When we left the piano, he inquired who "the pretty fair girl was," at the same time indicating my sister, and I introduced him to her, and they chatted; she being

sufficiently roused by him to put some animation into her countenance during their conversation. Meanwhile, I sat by, fascinated, enraptured, drinking in every word that he said. He asked permission to call, and came the next day; and when he took his leave, my aunt, who usually had a holy horror of strangers, declared him to be the most delightful man she had ever seen. He came again and again, practised music with us, gave us drawing lessons, showed us sketches of his own, and seemed never so happy, never so much at his ease, as when with us. I say with "us" advisedly, for he scarcely spoke more to one than to the other, though I saw, or fancied I saw, that if he had a preference, it was for my sister.

'The mere notion of that made me mad, for I loved him already; and she had not heart enough, or energy enough, to love anything but her fine clothes and her bed. She seemed surprised when I asked her if she had no special liking for him, and answered "No" with exemplary frankness.

'After a fortnight of this kind of life, Mr. Yeldham went away, to stay with some friends to whom he had promised himself, before coming to Stonechester. He said "Good-bye" to us, and declared that he would soon return; but the pleasure which I felt at this intimation was checked by observing the deep earnest glance with which he regarded my sister as he spoke; depth and earnestness to which she certainly did not respond, even if, as I very much doubt, she perceived them.

'Edward Yeldham went, and took my heart away with him. Two well-known dashing regiments had come into barracks at Chatham, and that was the liveliest winter that Stonechester had known for years; but I seemed to have lost all my old zest for flirtation, and was actually pining after a man who had never spoken words of more than ordinary friendship to me! I sat out dances, and gave idiotic answers when addressed, and was so dull and *distraite* that people began to say that Emma and Florence Hastings had changed characters. There was some truth in this, for

my sister, who had listened unmoved to the dulcet tones of Edward Yeldham, and been not merely untouched by them, but unconscious of the fervent looks of admiration in his great dreamy eyes, was in love at last! In love with a thin little man, with the figure of a ramrod, and the voice of a drill-sergeant!

'This was Major Heriot, who came over to one of our county balls from Brompton barracks, where he was staying with some Indian military friends, and who, in his dry, bamboo kind of manner, seemed taken with Emma. "He was a mighty warrior," they told her, and had killed many black men; and on the strength of this, she fell down and worshipped him at once. He had money, which made the courtship very smooth; he was not a man to do anything hurriedly, but in due course of time he proposed, and was accepted. Between his proposal and their marriage, Mr. Yeldham came back to Stonechester. He came to Stonechester, and to our house, at a time when I was the only one at home. I saw him: had I had any doubt of his love for Emma—and

I had none—I should have known it by the expression of his face, by the tone of his voice, when he asked me if the news he had heard was true, and if he had to congratulate me upon my sister's engagement. When I told him "Yes," he muttered some vague politeness, and speedily changed the subject. "He had only looked in at Stonechester," he said, "on his way to Dover; he was going abroad again for some little time. He should not be back until long after my sister's marriage. Would I remember him very kindly to her?" and—he was gone.

'With such proofs of Mr. Yeldham's love for my sister, my pride should, of course, have taught me to give up the worship with which I had regarded him, and to cast out his image from the place which it occupied in my thoughts. Did I do this? Not the least in the world. I had seen him. I had listened to him once again, and I was more madly in love with him than ever; besides, I had little fear of rivalry. I was innocent in those days, and I thought that by my sister's marriage,

she, my only obstacle, would be removed from my path, and that Edward Yeldham, with his eyes open to my devotion to him, would ask me to become his wife.

'Emma was married. On her wedding-day came, as a present, a set of handsome coral ornaments, with Mr. Yeldham's card, bearing some address in Palermo pencilled on it, inside the case. That was all that was heard of him until some three months after, when, one spring afternoon, he called at the house which the Heriots were then occupying in London. I was staying with them at the time, and carefully marked his manner; I had opportunities of doing so, for he was asked to dinner, and became a frequent visitor at the house. On a subsequent occasion of his being in Mrs. Heriot's company, I saw the fatal mistake which I had made in imagining that her marriage would cure him of his infatuation. Nothing could be more respectful than his manner to her. I firmly believe from the hour of his first introduction to her at the deanery, to the day of his death, he never addressed to

her one word of what the world calls gallantry; but neither his eyes nor the tones of his voice were under his control, and I knew that his worship of Emma was as devoted as ever.

'Major Heriot saw it also; he chafed under this man's constant presence and evident admiration of Mrs. Heriot. He spoke to Emma about it, and she, who thought that the sun shone out of her husband's small gray eyes (you have better eyes than your father, Gerald), came to me full of incredulous laughter, declaring that the whole thing was a mistake, and that Mr. Yeldham's visits were entirely on my account, as she had told the Major! I did not contradict her; all I cared for was to see him, to be thrown into his society, to soothe myself in the light of his eyes and with the music of his voice. After all, I was in one sense safe from my rival now. I knew Edward Yeldham's sense of honour, knew that whatever he might feel, the fact of her marriage was sufficient to prevent him ever making love to her, and felt sure that I should one day gain him for myself.

'Very shortly after that affair came a crisis, unexpected, and far different from anything I had believed or hoped. One evening, after a small dinner-party at my sister's, Mr. Yeldham and I were seated in the conservatory; he was talking hypothetically and of a third person, as it afterwards transpired, in a way which led me, maddened as I was by my love for him, to believe that he was pleading his own cause; and on his pausing for a moment, I said something equivalent to an acceptance of his suit. That was the most painful moment of my life, but it was more painful almost for him than for me. I shall never forget how gently and yet how completely he showed me my error, leaving me no straw of hope to cling to. "I was young," he said, "and had my life before me; he was doomed to celibacy and solitude, but while there could never be anything between us stronger than friendship, there was no reason why that friendship should not be most deep and most lasting!" I agreed to this. I gave him my hand upon the bargain, and, as I gave

it him, I wished that it had been dagger-armed that I might have slain him where I stood, for I hated him from the bottom of my heart!

'I avoided Mr. Yeldham when he called at the house after that episode, and I suppose four or five months elapsed before I saw him again. He reappeared in September at Baden, where I was staying with the Heriots, and my quick eyes soon showed me that his devotion to Emma had undergone no change. To me his manner was more attentive, more cordial, than it had ever been before. He seemed to feel that we understood each other, and that no misconstruction could be placed upon our relations. My cordiality was seemingly as great as his, but in my heart I hated him, and my one longing was for revenge upon him. This revenge I soon found means to gratify.

'Two days after Mr. Yeldham's appearance, Emma told me that Major Heriot's jealousy was again aroused, and I took care that it should have enough to feed on— Shall

I go on? You loved your mother, Gerald, and you will hate me when you hear the rest.'

'Go on, if you please; it is for my mother's sake that I ask you to proceed.'

'As you will,' said Mrs. Entwistle, with a slight shrug of her shoulders. 'As I said before, I have no feeling of repentance for my actions then. Major Heriot was jealous, and I fed the flame of his jealousy by anonymous letters, and by every possible device which I could carry out unsuspected. My sister would suffer, it is true, but I had little sisterly feeling for her. I do not think I ever thought of her in the matter; all I thought of was revenge upon the man who had slighted me in my love. Mixed up with this was a feeling that if I could make myself useful to him, make him thoroughly depend on me, I might win him again! You cannot understand the coexistence of two such feelings, but you are not a woman.

'At last I thought I saw my way to carrying out this idea. A grand ball was to be

given at a French banker's to which no one was to be admitted except in mask and domino, the supper hour being named for the period of identification, when disguise was to be laid aside. Invitations were sent to the Heriots and myself, and accepted by all; but, acting on the advice of an anonymous letter, written by me in the same hand and style as those previously sent to him, Major Heriot pleaded illness just before the time of starting, and begged us to go alone. The anonymous letter told him that he would that night have an opportunity of observing Mr. Yeldham's conduct towards his wife. Mr. Yeldham's dress he knew, as he had had a hand in its selection; Mrs. Heriot and Miss Hastings would be dressed in similar dominoes, black with rose edgings. And as the ladies were exactly alike in height and figure, he must, if he would keep an eye of observation on his wife, be careful to remember the sole distinguishing mark; which was, that she would wear a small lavender-coloured bow sewn on the hood of

her domino, whereas her sister's would be perfectly plain.

'When the carriage, containing only my sister and myself, drove up to the door of the hotel where the ball was given, she alighted first; and as she was getting out, I securely pinned to the hood of my own domino the lavender bow which I had provided for the purpose. We were both masked, as was every one else, but we were soon joined by Mr. Yeldham, whose dress we recognised at once, and by other friends. I managed to draw Mr. Yeldham apart from the others, and quickly perceived that our movements were watched by a small active figure in a black domino. I danced two consecutive dances with my companion, and afterwards, under the pretext of suffering from heat, asked him to take me into the conservatory, where we seated ourselves in a position where our every movement could be seen by the frequent loungers in the passage at the end, whither, however, the sound of our voices could not reach. No sooner

were we seated, than I marked the slight figure in the black domino intently regarding us. I talked with great animation, though purposely in a low tone, and seemed to inspire my companion. I reminded him of some story of private theatricals, with which he had amused me when in London, and asked him to repeat it. He acted the scene which he described, and in so doing, he took my hand and bent over me as though addressing me in the most fervent manner. At that moment, with one upward glance, I saw the man in the domino turn away and disappear; then I knew that my revenge on the man that had slighted me was about to be accomplished.'

'Good God!' cried Gerald, 'I see it all now!'

'Stay and hear me out. I was about to meet some friends in Switzerland, and had arranged to start at a very early hour that morning. On our arrival at home, Mrs. Heriot was surprised to find that her husband had just gone out. He did not return until

he had shot Edward Yeldham, in the full belief that he was Mrs. Heriot's lover.'

'But could not my mother prove—'

'What? and to whom could she appeal? To me, you will say, to prove that I, and not she, was the person addressed in the conservatory? I was far away by that time, and the letter which she wrote failed to reach me.'

'But the domino—Sir Geoffry—my father—knew that the woman who was in the conservatory wore a lavender bow in her domino hood?'

'That lavender bow was in the hood of Mrs. Heriot's domino when she produced it to convince her husband of his error! I myself pinned it there as she rested on my shoulder on our way back from the ball.'

Mrs. Entwistle paused, and looked up at Gerald, expecting an outburst of wrath.

But the tears were in his eyes as he muttered in a broken voice:

'My poor darling! my poor darling! how she must have suffered! Thank God, her innocence can now be proved!'

CHAPTER X.

TRACKED.

The startling news which Mrs. Pickering conveyed to Mr. Drage seemed literally to take away his breath. He pressed one hand on his heart and leaned his head on the other, which was supported by the writing-table at which he was seated. He remained in this position for a few moments, until the spasm had passed away. When he raised his head his voice was scarcely under his command as he said:

'This is very dreadful news! Is it perfectly to be relied on?'

'I have already given you my authority. I came upon it by the merest accident last night, as I was reading aloud to Sir Geoffry.

I have taken a copy of the paragraph, and it is there.' She laid the paper on the desk before him. He took it up and read it attentively. Then he said:

'It is frank enough, certainly, and prints the names plainly, and in full. If you have any doubt as to its authenticity, I think we can make ourselves certain on that point through my father.'

'Your father, Mr. Drage?'

'Yes. He is, as you know, somewhat potential in the City, where'—pointing to the paper—'both the late husband of the lady and your—and Mr. Vane seem to have been engaged. If I were to write to my father he could doubtless make inquiries, and ascertain if the news herein contained is false or true.'

'I have little doubt of its truth,' said Madge, 'but still less of the identity of the person spoken of with my husband. Accepting this, what am I to do?'

'You must take action of some kind, Mrs. Pickering,' said Mr. Drage nervously. 'It would be impossible for you to remain quiet,

now that you have been placed in possession of this information.'

'I wish the wretched newspaper had never come into the place!' cried Madge. 'I was living quietly enough, and should have continued to do so, no matter what had happened in the outer world, so long as the knowledge of it was kept from me. What benefit has my learning this news been to me, or to any one? It has completely destroyed the peace of mind which I have been so long in acquiring; and, after all, what good can I do? what harm can I prevent?'

'You must, indeed, have been much upset,' said the rector gravely; 'for I should scarcely recognise that remark as coming from one who, in general, thinks so little of herself, and so much of her opportunities of serving her fellow-creatures. Surely you must perceive that you may now be the means of saving this lady from an illegal marriage, and from a life of consequent misery.'

'Does one necessarily follow the other?' asked Madge bitterly. 'Mine was a legal

marriage, and yet it can scarcely be said to have been a happy one. This woman has been married before, and has had experience of the world. She will know how to humour her husband, and besides, too, she has wealth. I don't think that Philip Vane, having much of his own way, and plenty of money at his command, would be an ineligible companion for such a person. I am by no means prepared to allow that there must necessarily be even the usual amount of married misery in such a union.'

The scarlet spot stood out brightly in the rector's cheeks, and he moved forward in his chair as though about to speak. He managed, however, to check the threatened outburst of his wrath, and said quietly:

'You are plainly not yourself this morning, Mrs. Pickering; you are the last person in whom I should have expected to find an apologist for outraging a law made both by God and man. I scarcely think we can discuss the matter while you are in this spirit; it would be better for you to allow me to call

upon you in a day or two, when the effect of the news which you have thus suddenly learned has somewhat subsided.'

There was nothing cruel in this remark, but the words were the harshest which, since his acquaintance with Madge, the rector had ever used towards her; and his manner was marked by a sternness which she had never previously noticed in him.

'I was wrong,' she said frankly, 'and you are right in thus reproving me; but I suppose even you will allow that my fate just now is somewhat hard? I have described to you what effect this announcement had upon me when I first saw it last night; I was stupefied. An hour afterwards, when I read it at my leisure, and pondered over it, I was mad, and could have killed Philip Vane had he crossed my path. At that moment I could have killed this woman who is to be his wife! Now, I wish to kill no one, except,' she added, with a faint smile, 'perhaps the newspaper-man, whose paragraph has so upset me, and my real desire would be to leave

things exactly as they are, to fall into such channels as chance may mark out for them, and to pursue the even tenor of my way.'

'That is impossible now, Mrs. Pickering,' said the rector, speaking in his usual soft tone and trustful manner. 'It is not for us to inquire why you, the person most interested in hearing of this news, should—accidentally, apparently—have had it brought before you. That it was with some wise purpose, I do not doubt, though I cannot say positively; but this I can say positively, that being aware of it, it is your duty to prevent the commission of this crime.'

'That can only be done effectually by my seeing this—this lady, and acquainting her with the exact position in which I stand towards the man she is about to marry.'

'That I think should be your last resource,' said Mr. Drage, after a pause. 'Under the old rules of woodcraft, it was not considered a part of sport to give any law to the fox, who might be "trapped and slain" whenever he could be caught; and no doubt

the majority of the world would class Mr. Vane in this category. But situated as you are with him, it is only fair that, even at this juncture, he should experience better treatment at your hands; and it will be right, I think, that in the first place you should let him know your acquaintance with his project, and your determination to thwart it.'

'That would involve my seeing him?' asked Madge.

'Unquestionably,' replied the rector; 'it is not a matter that could be managed by deputy.'

'I could not do that,' said Madge, shuddering. 'I could not possibly face him alone again.'

'You need not be alone,' said Mr. Drage; 'I will accompany you very willingly if you wish it. As your parish priest and intimate friend, the repository of your confidence, I could go with you on this errand, and—'

'It would be impossible, under any circumstances,' cried Madge; 'I could not see him again—I will not do it.'

'You must,' said Mr. Drage firmly. 'It is a matter of duty, and when I have said that to you, I know I need say no more.'

There must have been something in this tall, ungainly, fragile man—perhaps it was the earnestness of his manner, or the knowledge on the part of those who heard him, that, in all sincerity, he practised what he preached—which commanded obedience.

After his last words, Madge said simply, 'Very well, I will do as you suggest.'

And he knew that his advice would be followed to the letter.

'I need not tell you that you are acting rightly,' he said; 'you have an intuitive knowledge of it.'

'I will do as you advise me,' she replied; 'but there is one thing which we have not yet settled. How and where am I to find Mr. Philip Vane?'

'I do not imagine there will be much difficulty in tracing him,' said the rector. 'I will, with your permission, enclose a copy of that paragraph to my father, and without giv-

ing him any reasons, will ask him to find out for me whether the news contained in it is true, and who and what are the persons whose affairs are therein freely discussed. I will ask him to find out what is Mr. Vane's City status, and what his private address.'

'You are determined to leave me no loophole,' said Madge, with another attempt at a smile.

'Determined,' said Mr. Drage, taking her hand. 'I have seen you under a great many phases, and I want you to be successful in this as in all the others.'

So the letter was written to the rector's father, and in the interval between its dispatch and the receipt of the reply, Madge endeavoured to school herself for the task which she had undertaken to execute. It would be a difficult one, she knew right well, but she knew also that her best chance of going through with it successfully was to cultivate the callousness with which for so long a time she had regarded Philip Vane and his affairs, and from which she had only been

roused by the sudden shock of the news concerning him. The indignation roused by that news, the strange feeling of jealousy that any one should occupy what was her lawful position, the curious desire to claim that position, which she had long since calmly yielded up, directly she saw it about to be taken by another,—all these disturbing sensations had passed away, and left her calm and equal-minded as she had been for months, for years previously. Whether or not her equanimity would desert her when she saw her husband face to face, she could not say. She endeavoured to rehearse in her mind all that might probably take place on the occasion of their meeting; all the sneers and brutalities which he would hurl at her, when he heard the object of her visit, and after a certain amount of preparation, she conducted herself, so far as the rehearsal was concerned, to her entire satisfaction.

In about a week's time she received a letter from Mr. Drage, saying that his father's reply had arrived, and he would be glad to

see her at the rectory on the first convenient opportunity.

That same day she took occasion to go into town, and found the rector expecting her. When the servant who announced her had retired, Mr. Drage said, with a grave smile:

'You will be more pleased than I am myself with a certain portion of the news which I have to announce to you. My father placed my letter in the hands of a confidential clerk who has been with him for years, and he it is who replies to my inquiries. I will read what he says.'

The rector took up a letter lying on the desk before him, and read as follows:

'There would seem to be no doubt about the bona fides of the newspaper paragraph, copy of which was forwarded by you. Have traced paragraph from Anglo-Indian paper (where it was expanded by addition of last lines) to *Fashionable Tatler*, where it originally appeared, and have seen receipt for three and six, signed by Rumbold, described as "hall porter in nobleman's family," as pay-

ment for it. Andreas Bendixen died 5th of June 1858. Personal property sworn under one hundred and thirty thousand pounds; clear half to widow, other half divided among three brothers, but to remain in the business for ten years. Mrs. Bendixen resides 204 Harley-street. Sent there — out of town— servant declined to give address. Mr. Philip Vane, general manager, Terra del Fuegos Mining Company, and on various other boards of direction. Private residence, Z 20, the Albany. Sent to both places—said to be out of town. Messenger saw clerks in the City— valet at Albany. Both declined to give Mr. V.'s address, professing not to know it.'

'Which portion of this communication is to please me more than it does you?' asked Madge, as he laid down the paper.

'That which states that Mr. Vane's present whereabouts cannot be ascertained,' said the rector. 'You seemed so averse to meeting him the last time we talked the matter over, that I imagined you would have been glad of the excuse thus afforded you.'

'On the contrary,' said Madge; 'the more I have thought of the matter, the more I have seen it from your point of view, and the more am I convinced of the necessity of my taking action in it.'

'That necessity seems to me more than ever urgent,' said the rector. 'Neither of these people are to be found in London; both are simultaneously away from town, and the address of neither can be ascertained. Had not the insertion of that paragraph shown that they evidently courted publicity, I should imagine they had gone away to be married quietly from some friend's house in the country, and to escape from the usual fuss and worry of a fashionable wedding. Even as it is, if we want to prevent this man from carrying his atrocious scheme into operation, I do not think we have any time to lose.'

'What more can we do?' asked Madge.

'I am afraid nothing,' said the rector, shrugging his shoulders. 'I have written to my father's head clerk to renew the inquiries at Mr. Vane's address from day to day, and

to let it be known that an important communication awaits him.'

So Madge returned home beaten, and dispirited at her failure. The next morning brought a letter from Rose. It ran thus:

Dearest Madge,—What they call the London season is over now, and the work at the office has become very much slacker, so the superintendent says I can have my fortnight's holiday now if I like, and I think I should like very much indeed, for the weather is dreadfully hot, and I have been working very hard all the summer, and begin to feel that I want a change. So I write to ask if you can get a holiday at the same time, Madge, and then we might go to some seaside place together, and enjoy yourselves. That would be nicest of all; but if you cannot manage to get away from your duties, I might come down to Springside and go into our old lodging, or one like it, and you could come to see me whenever you were disengaged. If you told Sir Geoffry Heriot your sister were coming

down, I don't suppose that he would make any objection to your being a great deal with me, as he seems, from all you say of him, to be a very kind old man.

For I must see you somewhere, Madge, I must, indeed. I know that no amount of fresh air or change of scene would do me half as much good as a long talk with you, and I shall only fret and worry myself until I have it.

Can you imagine what it is all about, Madge? You are so quick and clever, that I daresay you have guessed already, and indeed I should not be surprised if my previous letters had been filled with no other subject, as I always write to you exactly what I think, and I have scarcely thought about anything else for months. Of course, Madge, I mean Mr. Gerald Hardinge! He has been very kind to me, and I have seen a great deal of him lately; he has lent me plenty of books, and some of his drawings to copy; and the other evening, when I incautiously said something about missing that old piano, which we used to thump and strum away on at Miss Cave's

lodgings, Mr. Hardinge asked if I would permit him to hire another for me. I could not sanction this, of course, and said no; but he insisted so strongly, that I had to invent a little story, and tell him that Mrs. Bland would not sanction any piano practice in her house. That seemed to satisfy him, for he said Mrs. Bland was a most respectable woman, and I was most happily placed under her charge; and he thought it would be highly inexpedient for me to go to any other lodging. 'Highly inexpedient' were the words he used, looking as grave as a judge all the time; for he is awfully proper and decorous, though, at the same time, he is awfully nice. I can see you raise your eyebrows in astonishment when you read what I am now going to tell you. That frequently during these long summer evenings I have walked with him in Kensington Gardens, and that we have talked for hours and hours together, and that he has never said one word of you. I cannot tell exactly what it is he talks about; I often try to think of it after we have parted, and I am

at home again alone, but I never can recollect it exactly; I only know that he talks very cleverly and very charmingly, and I am only required to say a word here and there.

O, Madge, it is no use my beating about the bush any longer, and attempting to deceive you; I have read over what I have just written, and I might as well put in so many words what you already know, that I am madly in love with Gerald, and think there is no one like him in the world. Don't think this a sudden fit of frenzy, and that I have gone mad; it has been growing and growing ever so long, ever since we were at Wexeter together, and he used to give me drawing lessons.

Mind, Madge, he does not make love to me—at least, I mean to say, exactly make love; he is far too honourable to attempt to take the slightest advantage of my position, and he has never said anything to me which you might not have heard. I mean, of course, anything so far as honour is concerned; but his manner is so

patient with my ignorance and my folly; so careful to prevent its ever occurring to me that I am not moving in his sphere, or that there is any difference in our rank in life, and so handsome—you have no idea, Madge, what he is like now—that I cannot help loving him immensely.

I do not know that I should have taken even you into confidence, Madge, if it could have gone on in this way, but I am sufficiently sensible to know that it cannot. The summer evenings are at an end now, and there will be no more long walks, and then all my chances of seeing Gerald, save for a few moments at a time, are over; and then I sometimes think that if I were to give up seeing him it would kill me, and then I know I must give it up, and then I think I should go mad, only I find comfort in the remembrances of your strong, sound sense, and the certainty that you will advise me for the best; and remember, dear, whatever has to be done, and whatever is to be said to Gerald about it, you must say it for me, because I could never—but we will

talk this all over when I come down to see you.

O, by the way, you recollect my writing to you some time ago of Gerald telling me about an old lady whom he wished me to call upon, but she was ill at the time. She is always ill, it appears, and as Gerald wished her very much to see me, I walked there with him the other evening. She lives in a fashionable part of the town, in a tiny little mite of a house, exquisitely furnished, and looking on to Hyde Park; she has been a handsome woman, and was so beautifully dressed, just in good taste, you know, for an invalid, who is always compelled to lie on a sofa. She tried to be very polite, but she is of the old C-A-T order, looking me up and down, and through and through, and 'Miss Pierrepointed' me whenever she addressed me. When I rose to go, I almost expected her to ring and order 'the young person to be shown out.' Gerald looked annoyed, and I rather think the introduction was a failure. He has not said much about it since, only that Mrs. Entwistle (that's

her funny old name) was peculiar, and that allowances must be made for her as an invalid, &c.

Now, dearest Madge, write to me at once, and tell me what we shall do about meeting; and don't fret yourself about what I have told you, for it is all perfectly right, and I will be entirely guided by your advice.

Your loving

Rose.

P.S. I had almost forgotten to tell you a curious thing which happened yesterday. We have a new clerk at the counter, and it appears he refused to take a message because it was written in cipher; the person delivering it insisted on its being forwarded, and as he refused to go away, higher authority was appealed to, and I was sent for. Directly I set eyes upon the man, who wished the telegram forwarded, I recognised him at once. Don't you recollect, just a short time before the close of the season at Wexeter, I came one morning to fetch you after rehearsal, and, as we walked away from

the theatre, we were followed for a long distance by a short stout man, whose hands we noticed were covered with blazing diamond rings, and who kept on dogging our footsteps, to my great amusement? But you were in a tremendous rage about it, and at last you stopped dead, and turning round, looked the man up and down as though you could have killed and eaten him on the spot, and then he, in a far more gentlemanly manner than we either of us could have given him credit for, raised his hat and went away.

There stood the very man at our counter; I recognised him in an instant; saw the whole scene before me. Of course he didn't recognise, in the superintendent of the telegraph office, the sister and companion of the celebrated actress, Miss M. P. I inquired into the matter, told him that his message could be forwarded, and he retired, taking off his hat to me, exactly as he had taken it off to you on the before-named memorable occasion.

I wonder who he is; he looked very like a member of the profession, or perhaps more in

the style of the manager of that American circus which came to one of the towns—I forget which—where you were acting when I was with you. His message was in cipher, and there is therefore nothing in it which led to his identification; it is a funny message, I enclose you a copy of it.

'I enclose you a copy of it,' repeated Madge, turning over the paper, 'and there is nothing enclosed; that's just like Rose. Ah, what is this?' and she stooped down to pick up a piece of paper lying on the ground at her feet. It was the usual printed form of a telegraph message. Madge noticed that it was headed 'copy,' that it was filled up in Rose's handwriting, and that it was lengthy, but she read nothing beyond the first two lines, which ran thus:

'D. L. B., London, to Philip Vane, Esq., care of P. Kaulbach, Esq., Hollycombe, Sandown, Isle of Wight.'

Madge started, doubting whether she had read aright; she re-read the address carefully,

placed the paper in her pocket, and started off at once for the rectory.

She found Mr. Drage at home, and read aloud to him the text of Rose's letter; she did not show him the copy of the telegram, but she repeated exactly the address it contained. There was no need for her to refer to the written document, every word of that address was burning in her memory, as though each had been emblazoned in letters of fire.

'This is, to say the least of it, very lucky,' said Mr. Drage, 'for I will use that phrase in preference to any more serious one, which might seem to imply especial interposition on our behalf. Have you thought of what you will do now?'

'I have,' said Madge. 'I will make my way at once to the place where Philip Vane is staying, and confront him. I am sufficient woman of business to have consulted *Bradshaw* while waiting for you, and I have already arranged my route; I find that I can go across country to Yeovil, sleep there this evening, and proceed to-morrow to South-

ampton, whence I can cross to the Isle of Wight.'

'May I not accompany you?' said Mr. Drage.

'No,' said Madge, 'I think it will be better that I should go alone: not that I think either of us need have the smallest fear of what the world might say about such a proceeding, but I am sure that my chance of—well, I suppose I may say, of escaping with my life from my husband, will be greater if he imagines I have acted entirely on my own promptings in this affair.'

'The argument you have used is scarcely one which should induce me to give way to you,' said Mr. Drage; 'however, since you are determined, go, and God speed you! Sir Geoffry will be perfectly prepared to hear you wish for a few days' change; I have taken care of that.'

On the second evening after her leaving Wheatcroft, Madge Pierrepoint rang the bell of a large and handsome one-storied villa,

standing in a lovely garden, and over-looking Sandown Bay. The hall-door was open, and several servants were flitting about, busily engaged removing the dinner. One of these advanced towards her.

'Is Mr. Philip Vane within?'

The servant glanced first at her and then at the fly which had brought her from the hotel, then he was reassured.

'Mr. Vane is staying in the house, ma'am,' he replied.

'I wish to speak with him.'

'Certainly, ma'am,' said the man, showing the way into a small room. 'Will you walk into the study? Who shall I say wishes to see Mr. Vane?'

'Say Mrs. Vane, if you please,' said Madge firmly.

CHAPTER XI.

FATHER AND SON.

The revelation made by Mrs. Entwistle to her nephew had a twofold effect upon Gerald's mind. He was of course filled with joy at the discovery that his belief in his mother's innocence was well founded, but this joy was dashed with keen regret at the thought that the woman to whom he owed so much had acted so wickedly towards her sister, and that, even at the time of her narration, she did not express, and probably did not feel, the slightest remorse for the crime she had committed, and the misery which she had brought about. A great difficulty presented itself to the young man. He felt it to be of paramount importance that his mother's

memory should be at once freed from the stain which, as his father believed, had so long rested upon it; and that though reparation was of course impossible, Sir Geoffry might be able to recall the associations of his married life without regret, and to believe in the asseverations of her innocence which his wife had made on parting from him.

To bring about this result successfully would, however, be no easy matter. In the first place, Gerald knew that Mrs. Entwistle's state of health was such as to render her extremely susceptible to any sudden emotion; and he dreaded the effect which the expression of his determination to reveal to his father the real state of the circumstances regarding Mr. Yeldham, and the error under which that unfortunate man's life had been sacrificed, might have upon her. Then again, even supposing that he were enabled to break his intention to Mrs. Entwistle, without causing her much suffering, and to obtain her consent to the steps which he proposed to take, Gerald felt more than doubtful of the

reception he might meet with at his father's hands. Even with his small experience of Sir Geoffry's temper, Gerald felt it probable that the old General would not merely discredit the information which his son sought to convey to him, but that he would possibly regard the whole affair as a scheme concocted by Gerald, with a view to his reinstatement in his position as his father's heir. However, the young man had made up his mind that the difficulties, of whatever nature they might happen to be, must be surmounted; and when he rose on the morning after Mrs. Entwistle's confession, it was with the full determination of taking prompt action towards the vindication of his mother's memory, even though his aunt might choose to withhold the consent which he intended to ask of her.

Whatever effect the narration of those dark passages in her early career may have had upon Mrs. Entwistle, she had herself sufficiently under control to prevent the manifestation of any outward sign; and when Gerald entered her boudoir, he found

her lying on her sofa, in her usual position by the window, and in her usual state. She received him with her ordinary affectionate greeting; asked of his intended movements for the day, and chatted on indifferent topics, never making the smallest allusion to the occurrences of the previous evening, even when Gerald inquired, with what he intended to be special emphasis, after her health.

'I feel just as usual, my dear boy,' she said, with a faint smile, 'and if I continue as I am now, I shall almost bring myself to believe that Doctor Asprey is wrong, and that I, as it were, exist upon my illness. That was a sharp attack that I had last night, but it seems to have left no special ill effect behind it, as I am in my normal state of lassitude and weariness.'

'Even that is good hearing,' said Gerald, 'for I was prepared to find you a prisoner to your room, and I had something particular to say to you.'

'Again,' cried the invalid, with up-lifted eyebrows and a quaint expression of horror

in her face. 'O for the happy days, when we had no mysterious communications to make to one another! I begin to feel myself like a modernised Mrs. Radcliffe, and expect to find trap-doors in the library floor, and see sheeted spectres gibbering in the park.'

'You will readily understand what I have to ask you,' said Gerald. 'I need not enter into the details of the quarrel between father and son. I may simply say that it arose from my obedience to an obligation laid on me by my mother on her death-bed, and—'

'Is it positively necessary, my dear boy, that we should enter into these family matters?' asked the invalid querulously.

'It is,' said Gerald, 'in so much as that in his conduct to me, as in every act of his life subsequent to his parting from my mother, Sir Geoffry has been guided by a belief in his wife's misconduct, if not actual shame. It is necessary that he should be enlightened on that matter, and that the truth should be told to him.'

'Gerald,' cried Mrs. Entwistle, with an ineffectual struggle to raise herself on her couch, 'you would not betray me?'

'I would vindicate the memory of the dead,' said Gerald.

'But at my expense. Wait till I am gone, my dear boy; you will not have to postpone your explanation long, and—and my views have somewhat altered since last night.'

'You wish you had not told me this story,' said he, bending over her and taking her hand.

'With all my soul I wish it,' said Mrs. Entwistle earnestly. 'It is natural enough and to be expected, of course, but your manner seems changed and different towards me this morning. And I—I have been, and am so fond of you.'

'But she was my mother,' said Gerald sadly. 'Ah, you will not leave her memory with this stain upon it! I am, I know, the only person in the world whose affection you care for, and God knows it is not for

me, owing as I do almost everything to your kindness, to sit in judgment on matters which took place almost before my existence. Your conduct to her has been atoned by your conduct to me, and if my father lost his wife through your acts, I have found a second mother in you.'

As he said these words he bent over the couch, and kissed the wan cheeks, down which the tears were coursing. Then he continued : 'But you will not refuse to make reparation by letting me see my father, to clear his mind of the groundless suspicion which has so long possessed him, and of showing how harshly his wife was treated by him.'

'I should not object to that,' said Mrs. Entwistle, with something of the old sarcastic ring in her voice. 'Major Heriot never appreciated my sister, and, even in his most devoted days, treated her with a frigid courtesy which would have led any woman with a little spirit to hate him.'

'You will not object, then, to my see-

ing Sir Geoffry, and acquainting him with what you told me last night?'

'You must do as you will,' said the invalid wearily; 'but a very short time, and I shall be beyond the influence of his wrath, however violent it may be.'

So the concession was granted, though unwillingly, and Gerald determined to go down to Springside, where he had ascertained that his father was residing, and make an effort to see him. He was sufficiently acquainted with the violence of Sir Geoffry's temper to appreciate fully the difficulty of his task, and he allowed to himself that, even if he succeeded in obtaining admission into his father's presence, he would yet be far from attaining the object of his visit. Once admitted to an audience, much doubtless rested with him, and his success would greatly depend on his power of holding himself in check, and rendering himself invulnerable to the taunts, and worse than taunts, with which he was likely to be greeted. Looking at the motives which influenced

him, the restitution of his mother's good name, and the reparation of the wrong which had been done to her during her lifetime, and to her memory since her death, the young man felt that he would be enabled to fulfil his self-imposed task in the spirit in which he had conceived it. It would be a difficult task, no doubt, but it should be undertaken in a proper spirit, and would, he hoped, be carried out successfully.

Gerald did not purpose going to Springside until next morning. He did not think it would be kind to leave Mrs. Entwistle until he had seen whether the access of illness, which had induced her to send for Dr. Asprey, gave any signs of reappearance, and moreover, he had something else to do that morning. Something particular, apparently, so attentive was he to a second toilet, which he seemed to think it necessary to perform after quitting his aunt's presence, and at the conclusion of which he left the house and struck across the park towards Kensington Gardens.

The broad walk, which had been lately

filled with fashionable promenaders, was now almost deserted, and the turfy paths of the long green alleys were already dotted with freshly fallen leaves. In many spots the grass had been worn away entirely, in more it was brown, brittle, and stubbly; the leaves lay where they fell, being not yet sufficiently numerous, in the gardener's opinion, to be worth the trouble of collection. The children usually found there, taking in the best imitation of fresh air under the circumstances, had gone to the seaside, accompanied by their nursemaids, and even the shabby-genteel people, whose business in life seems to be to sit on the extreme edges of the seats and eat captains' biscuits, had forsaken their haunts. Struck by the contrast between the gaiety which the scene had presented on the last occasion of his visiting it, and the desolation which then characterised it, Gerald Hardinge stopped and looked round, then, with a shiver, was turning away, when he caught sight of a figure, with its back towards him, some little distance off.

A female figure, trim, neat, and lissom, strolling along with somewhat languid steps, and idly pushing up the grass with her parasol. Just the sort of figure to induce a wish to see the face belonging to it. No wonder, then, that Gerald Hardinge, after a minute's hesitation, started in pursuit.

'I'm going blind, I fancy,' he said to himself, as he hurried along. 'It was by the merest chance that I saw her, and yet I felt certain she would not neglect my summons. How wonderfully graceful she is; how much improved since the old days!'

The next moment he had gained the lady's side. She gave a little cry as he stood suddenly before her, hat in hand. She had been startled by his appearance, and the colour flushed up into her cheeks. It was Rose Pierrepoint, with her promise of delicate beauty developed and matured, and with the bloom of health and quiet content in place of the anxious, irritable expression which her face formerly wore.

'You startled me, Mr. Gerald,' she said,

with a half-laugh. 'You came so quietly behind me on the grass that I did not hear you.'

'But you expected me, Rose?'

'O yes; but at the moment I was thinking of—something else.'

'You are as candid as ever.'

'You would not have me otherwise, Mr. Gerald?'

'Certainly not. Equally certainly I will not have you call me Mr. Gerald.'

'What would Mrs. Entwistle think if she heard me call you anything else?'

'Mrs. Entwistle is not here. What made you refer to her?'

'I don't know; she came into my head.'

'I notice she always does come into your head, or, at least, you always allude to her whenever you are annoyed. You did not like Mrs. Entwistle, Rose?'

'I did not take any violent fancy to her.'

'So I was sorry to see.'

'Were you? Well, then, if it will please you, I will take a violent fancy to her, Mr.—I mean, Gerald.'

'Don't be absurd, Rose; you are in one of your teasing humours, which always provoke me.'

'Then you should not have written to me to meet you at so short a notice, and come upon me so suddenly when you arrived. It was lucky your letter found me, as I might have started off for my holiday.'

'I knew you would not go without letting me know, and giving me the chance of saying good-bye. Rose, can you be serious for a minute?'

There was something in his tone which caused her to put off her light laughing manner in an instant. 'Of course I can, Gerald,' she said earnestly. 'If my nonsense pains you I—'

'You know there is nothing I love to listen to so much,' interrupted Gerald; 'but just now I have something in downright sober earnest to say to you, my child. You have known me, little Rose, in two very different positions in life.'

'Yes,' said Rose, rather sadly; 'long ago,

when you were a scene-painter; now, when you are a—a swell.'

'Yes; you fancy that I have returned to my family, but it is not so. Mrs. Entwistle is my aunt, it is true, but I have yet living a father, who has discarded me.'

'Discarded you, Gerald—for what?'

'Principally for siding with my mother, with whom also he had quarrelled, believing she had deceived him. It has just been my fortune to discover that his suspicions of my mother were utterly unfounded, and I am going to him to-morrow to prove this to him.'

'Coming on such an errand he will be sure to welcome you and take you back into favour, Gerald,' said Rose, with yet a touch of sadness in her voice.

'I am by no means so sure of that. If he does, well and good. I will ask nothing of him but his recognition and his name.'

'What is his name, Gerald?'

'That you shall not know, little Rose, until I have seen him. Curious, too, that you

should ask, as it is a matter in which you may be interested.'

'I, Gerald? How?'

'Surely you must know! Surely long ere this your heart must have told you how dear you are to me, Rose. Will you not answer me?' he said, taking her hand and passing it lightly through his arm.

'I—I—I thought you liked me, Gerald,' said the girl, looking down.

'Liked you!' he echoed, with a laugh. 'I like you so much that I am going to ask you to be my wife, to share my fortunes, and to take my name when,' he added, with a touch of bitterness, 'when it is decided under what name the remainder of my life is to be passed! What answer do you give me, Rose?'

She gave him none, beyond what was conveyed in the momentary upward glance of her large eyes, and in the slight pressure from the little hand that trembled on his arm. It was, however, apparently enough for Gerald, who, after glancing hastily round to see that there

were no observers within sight, bent down and touched her forehead with his lips.

'Thank you, dearest one,' he said. 'You are taking a leap in the dark, and have not the least idea what fate may be in store for you. But, whatever it is, I shall be by your side to share its troubles. Another twenty-four hours will determine whether I am to remain an outcast under a false name, or to resume my position as my father's son.'

'You are determined, then, to see your father, Gerald?'

'I am. It is my duty to tell him what I have heard, and to endeavour to satisfy him of its truth. Whether I fail in this, or whether I succeed, all I should ask of him would be the permission to bear his name. I want no money from him. I would take none.'

'Then if your father is still obdurate against you, Gerald, you will go on living as you have done lately?'

'Not entirely, little Rose. In the first place, I shall have you with me, and in the next I am determined to shake off this lazi-

ness under which I have so long been labouring, and to work for my living.'

'That's good hearing, Gerald,' said the girl, looking up delightedly at him. 'What you said last, I mean,' she added, noticing the smile upon his face; 'though I don't mean to deny that to become your wife will be the fulfilment of my dream of happiness.'

'It is very sweet of you to make such a confession. How long have you had this dream, Rose?'

'Almost all my life, it seems to me. It began, I think, in the old days at Wexeter, when you used to give me drawing lessons in Miss Cave's lodgings. You recollect Wexeter, Gerald, and Madge?'

'Yes,' he said, 'of course I recollect Madge well.'

'I was almost jealous of Madge once, I remember. I used to think you liked her, Gerald, but that of course was absurd. Poor darling Madge, how surprised she will be at what I have to tell her! I shall write to her directly I get home.'

'I think you had better leave it until you can tell her something more definite, dearest,' said Gerald. 'By to-morrow night I shall know what effect the communication I have to make to him will have upon my father, and you can then write more fully as to your future to your sister. Now talk to me about yourself.'

The approach of autumn, which strikes with dismay the inhabitants of most watering-places, whether inland or on the coast, is regarded very calmly by the dwellers in Springside, for to those who have been prudent enough to invest their savings in lodging-houses in that favourite spot, there is no portion of the year which does not bring its due amount of profit and gain. When the summer is over, and the London families, who have been making a holiday sojourn in the city of springs, return to the city of smuts, the Springsideites view the departure of their visitors with perfect composure. They know that after a very short interval, just long

enough for them to go through the process of a 'thorough clean up,' and the substitution of winter for summer furniture, their lodgings will be again filled, and this time by a class of tenant, rich, valetudinarian, and certain to remain for many weeks. This interval, however, though made much of by those who take advantage of it for the performance of necessary labour, is generally voted desperately dull by the better class of inhabitants, most of whom try to make their escape to more congenial places. Sir Geoffry, in particular, very much resented the state of affairs at this dull season of the year. Most of his club cronies were away; it was next to impossible to get up a rubber; and even the few friends admitted to the intimacy of Wheatcroft, were among the defaulters. Cleethorpe was shooting in Scotland, and Mr. Drage had gone over to attend a church congress, which was being held at Bircester. Sir Geoffry could have put up with all of this if Mrs. Pickering had been at home to talk with and read to him, but she had asked for a few days' holi-

day, and of course he had not dreamed of refusing her.

The instant she had gone the old General felt her loss. There was a letter from Irving —a long letter—full of business, which he would have liked to submit to her consideration, and in which he would not stir without her advice. He had grown accustomed to consult his housekeeper in almost everything, and to place great reliance on her judgment.

'A wonderful woman, sir!' Sir Geoffry said of Mrs. Pickering to his friend Cleethorpe, just before the gallant captain started for his shooting-box in the Highlands. 'A wonderful woman! Most women have a knack of hitting the right nail on the head, but this they do by accident, by intuition, as it is called, and can never tell you why! Now, Mrs. Pickering is always right, and can always give you her reason for being so. You did me an immense service, sir, when you persuaded that lady to undertake the management of my household.'

But Mrs. Pickering was gone, and had

taken her judgment with her, and Sir Geoffry was left alone, to use strong language at his loneliness and the dreariness of his house, and to render the lives of his servants almost insupportable, by the variety of his orders and the caprices of his querulous temper.

On the second night after Madge's departure, just at the time that she was entering the grounds at Hollycombe, Sir Geoffry was seated at the window of the dining-room, looking out into the garden, and wondering what he should do if chance ever removed Mrs. Pickering from his service. The mere idea of such a contingency made him hot with vexation; it was not like the same place without her, and nothing seemed to go on rightly in her absence.

'And yet,' said the old General to himself, 'and yet I'm likely to lose her at any moment. She's a young woman still, and a handsome woman, and attractive in every way, and is certain to be picked up sooner or later. If I were a younger man myself I should be too glad of such a wife; and of

course there are hundreds who have the same idea. Perhaps at this very moment there is some confounded fellow talking to her, and making up his mind that he'll ask her to marry him. What's that?'

He started, and shading his eyes with his hand, peered out into the gloaming.

'I could have sworn I saw a figure,' he said, turning back into the room, 'but there is nothing there. I'm nervous to-night, and shall set the doctor's warning at defiance, and take a glass or two of port. Absurd to think that a man of my figure, without any hereditary tendency to gout, should—'

He stopped, attracted by the noise made by the opening of the door, and looked in that direction. He saw the door open, and a man's figure enter the room and advance quickly towards him. For an instant the old General thought he was attacked, and his hand closed upon the neck of the decanter he was lifting from the sideboard, as his handiest weapon of defence.

The figure, however, stood upright and

motionless before him. As far as he could make out in the dull uncertain light it was that of a tall, well-knit young man, with a full and flowing beard.

Sir Geoffry eyed it for a moment in silence, then he said: 'Who are you, and what is your business here, sir?'

'I want to see you,' was the reply; but no sooner did the old General hear the tones of the voice from which it was uttered, than he relaxed his hold of the decanter, and stepping a pace forward, waved his hand toward the door.

'I know you now!' he cried, in loud and angry tones; 'I cannot discern your features, but I recognise your voice! How dare you insult me by your presence? Leave the house at once!'

'Father,' said the young man submissively.

'I have forbidden you ever to use that word to me,' cried Sir Geoffry. 'To what am I indebted, sir, for the honour of this visit? The last time I saw you, you were

full of your great career, and swaggered about not touching the money which was your due. I presume that delusion is at an end, and that you have come to claim your rights?'

'I have,' said Gerald, 'but not in the way that you imagine. I have come to claim my right to be regarded as your son; my mother's right to atonement for the grievous wrong you did to her while living, and which you have continued to her memory! O, sir, I told you I would make it the business of my life to discover the real story of Mr. Yeldham's acquaintance with my mother, and to prove to you that your jealous fears of her were groundless. I can prove all this to you now; I have come here to do so.'

'It is a lie!' cried the old man, stretching out his hands, and trembling with passion. 'You have come here because your funds are exhausted, and your creditors refuse to trust you farther! You can have the money, sir; it is yours by right; there is no occasion for you to descend to such paltry subterfuge.'

'Father, I implore—'

'I insist, sir, upon your discontinuing to address me in that manner,' said the old man, ringing the bell. 'Make your application to me in a business way, through a lawyer, and it shall be attended to. Riley!' he cried to the servant, who appeared at the door, 'what were you doing to permit this person to make his way into my presence? Show him out instantly, and never give him admittance here again.'

Gerald looked as if he would have spoken, but the old servant touched him on the shoulder, and sorrowfully preceded him out of the room.

CHAPTER XII.

CONFRONTED.

The room into which Madge was shown was a good specimen of that apartment which is called the 'library,' and which is to be found in the houses of all mushroom men of means, though the use to which it is put is extremely limited. There was a large and very handsome bookcase in polished mahogany, with plate-glass doors, filled with standard works, gorgeously bound and symmetrically arranged. The latest edition of the *Encyclopædia Britannica* was not too heavy, the newest high-priced novel was not too light, for the taste of the bookseller, to whom the charge of furnishing this collection had been committed. Mr. Kaulbach, the Anglicised German Jew, to whom the villa belonged,

knew nothing of literature; but he bought his books as he bought his wines, horses, pictures, furniture, and other articles of luxury, from the man with the best name in the trade, and as he paid a good price, concluded he had been supplied with a good article. There was a large writing-table, also of mahogany, with a blue morocco leather top, guiltless of scratch or stain, an inkstand, holding—on a moderate calculation—half a pint of ink, a sheaf of quill pens, and a stand of penholders of all kinds, odd little nicknacks for holding matches and wax, silver owls with red glass eyes, gilt dogs' heads for paper weights, gilt ducks' heads with opening bills, for letter-clips, and underneath the table, and by the side of the heavy oak chair, a dainty little basket, presumably intended for waste-paper. It was altogether a place for show rather than use, and not one where anything like real work could be done. Mr. Kaulbach never proposed to himself to do any work in it. All his writing was carried on in a dingy little office, in a black little square out of

Mincing-lane, on a high-shouldered, hacked, and ink-blotched desk, where he scrawled his cramped memoranda and smeary calculations, with the aid of a leaden inkstand and a corroded pen.

Madge looked about her with interest. Assuredly Philip Vane must have progressed in the world, as his present quarters were infinitely better than any which he had inhabited during her acquaintance with him. She had a kind of idea that Mr. Drage's notion might be correct, and that both Philip Vane and the lady, his engagement to whom had been publicly announced, were staying at the same country house together, and in another minute she would see him. He would be called away from the side of the rich prize he had recently won to the presence of the woman whom he had so basely deserted. How would he bear the meeting, she wondered. He would be savage when he saw her, more savage when he knew the purpose for which she had come. As yet he had never struck her. Oftentimes, in the old days,

she had thought that she could better have borne a blow from his hand than the scathing bitterness of his tongue; but that was long ago, when she was younger and stronger. Now she began to tremble at the mere thought of personal violence. She wished she had allowed Mr. Drage to accompany her; his presence would at least have prevented Philip Vane from indulging in any excessive outburst of wrath. The servants were moving about in the hall, and the doors of the room where the company were still evidently assembled at dinner were open; that was a point in her favour, Madge thought; from a sheer sense of decency Philip Vane would be compelled to put some curb upon his rage.

Who would he imagine was his visitor? The name which Madge had given to the servant was hers by right, but she had never used it, and so long and so completely had they been estranged that her husband would probably not think of her in connection with it. Upon that utter oblivion of her, or, if that were wanting, upon his fear of creating

a disturbance in his friend's house, Madge relied for her interview with her husband. The seeking of that interview was voluntary on her part, had not been decided upon until after full consideration and discussion, and must be gone through with now, even when she heard his step approaching the door.

Not his footstep after all; but, by its lightness and its fleetness, a woman's. Next moment the door opened, and a woman entered the room. A woman of middle height, but full and rounded figure, set off with flowing draperies and clouds of delicate lace. Queenly in her walk and movements, and of a flashing and disdainful beauty, with large liquid dark eyes, clear cut aquiline profile, mouth undoubtedly small, but yet with full and sensuous lips, and a mass of lustrous black hair twisted into a coronet on her head. She swept into the room, arranging the train of her dress with one hand, and with the other motioning to Madge, who had risen, to resume her chair.

'Pray be seated,' said the lady, with a

pleasant smile, and in a rich full voice; 'you asked to see Mr. Vane, I believe?'

'I—I did,' said Madge, nervous with surprise, and with her intuition of the identity of the person addressing her.

There was a singular contrast between these women. Madge pale as death, neatly, almost primly dressed, nervous and ill at ease; the other with a glowing complexion, richly and tastefully attired, and perfectly self-composed.

'I am sorry,' she said, 'that you should have been misled by the stupid blunder of a servant. You were told that Mr. Vane was stopping in this house, but the fact is that he left here yesterday morning, having been summoned away by a telegram on business of importance.'

'Is this true?' said Madge, half involuntarily.

The lady started and looked amazed, but said nothing.

'I beg your pardon,' said Madge, 'I did not mean to say that, I had no right to say it. Will Mr. Vane be long away?'

'I cannot say,' said the lady, in an altered tone, 'nor can I continue to hold a conversation with one who is a perfect stranger to me. Perhaps,' she continued, rising, 'perhaps you will leave your card, that Mr. Vane may have it on his return?'

'I have no card,' said Madge firmly; 'but I gave my name to the servant who showed me into this room.'

'The man made a worse blunder than when he told you that Mr. Vane was staying here,' said the lady, with curling lip, 'for he announced you as Mrs. Vane.'

'He delivered his message correctly in that instance, at least,' said Madge, 'for that was the name I gave him.'

'You are a connection of Mr. Vane's, I suppose?'

'I am.'

'May I ask what connection?'

'I am Philip Vane's wife!'

Madge had steadied her voice for this announcement, and spoke very quietly, without the smallest trace of theatrical intonation,

without the slightest gesture, each word clipping clearly and distinctly out of her lips.

The words thus quietly pronounced were not, however, without their effect; the lady who heard them seemed to reel, and leaned against the mantelpiece before which she had been standing. For an instant she looked across at Madge dreamily, and with dazed eyes, repeating the words she had heard, in a thick low tone, 'His wife did you say—Philip Vane's wife?'

'I am Philip Vane's wife,' repeated Madge, in the same clear, merciless tone. 'You, I conclude, are Mrs. Bendixen, the lady to whom, as the newspapers announced, my husband is about to be married. I am sorry,' continued Madge, changing her tone, 'to be compelled to interfere with your intended arrangements, but you will see that the step which you contemplated is impossible. I am Mrs. Philip Vane, and however poor my opinion may be of that position, I intend to claim and hold it for my own.'

As she spoke she drew herself up, stamped

her foot, and threw out her hand with a gesture which was familiar to her, and at which Philip Vane had so often sneered. There was defiance in that action, defiance in her kindling eyes, defiance in her ringing voice. Mrs. Bendixen, now thoroughly roused, leaned forward, looking eagerly at her visitor; but she had miscalculated the nature of the woman with whom she had to deal, for she said, half querulously, half fiercely:

'How dare you speak to me in this way! How dare you come into my presence! I know what the world is, and what sort of lives men lead, and I daresay you have been accustomed to call yourself Mrs. Vane, and imagine that you have a kind of right to do so; but of course there must be an end of that now. What do you look at me for in that way? Do you mean to say that you don't understand me?'

'I mean to say,' said Madge, who had lapsed into stone again, and sat with her steady, cold, pitiless gaze on the other woman's face, 'I mean to say you are talking in

riddles, and that if you want me to comprehend you, you must speak more plainly.'

'Then I tell you,' said Mrs. Bendixen, in a loud and shrill tone, which she moderated, when she recollected the proximity of the hall, where the servants were still engaged—'then I tell you that I daresay you may have called yourself Mrs. Vane, because you were Mr.—Mr. Vane's mistress; that he gave you money, and perhaps kept a house for you, and —and was fond of you! I know such things go on, but,' she added, the colour rising in her cheeks, and her eyes flashing, 'there must be an end to all that! You have doubtless come here to ask for money? If so, you shall have it. I will take care of that, but you must not see Mr. Vane again, nor talk of yourself as his wife. You must not repeat that wicked lie!'

She paused and leaned forward eagerly to see the effect which her words had created. There was anxiety in her eyes, in the manner with which from time to time she moistened her lips, in the irrepressible fluttering motion

of the hands which lay in her lap before her. By her words she had tried to impress on her visitor her own conviction of the truth of her statement; but her look and her involuntary action had the opposite effect.

'What I have said,' said Madge, still holding her with her eyes, 'is no lie, but God's truth! The lies which have been told you in this matter have come from him, not from me! I am Philip Vane's lawful wife! Of that fact I can give you proofs—but there is no need of that,' she said, changing her tone, 'I see you know it now, as you listen to me. Look at me! If you really have such a knowledge of the world as you profess, you will recognise at once that I am not of the stuff of which mistresses are made—I am Philip Vane's wife! Do you believe me?'

'I—I almost fear I do,' said Mrs. Bendixen, still bending forward in her chair, and gazing at the pale, grave face and neat figure before her.

'It matters little to me whether you do or do not,' said Madge, with a slight curl of her

lip, 'the fact remains, and can be proved at any moment. Now listen to me! When you tried to persuade yourself that my assertion was a lie, and that I was—what you said—you pretended to think that I had come here for money. What do you think, now, is the motive of my visit?'

'I—cannot tell,' stammered Mrs. Bendixen, 'unless it is revenge. You seem a dreadfully determined woman.'

'Do I?' said Madge, as the faint glimmer of a contemptuous smile passed across her face. 'I do not think that I am dreadfully determined; I am perfectly sure that I have no desire for revenge. Revenge on whom? On you? You have been passive in this matter; your part has been merely that of the dupe! On Philip Vane? One cannot be revenged on the dead, and Philip Vane is as dead to me as if I had seen him in his shroud.'

'O, don't talk in that dreadful manner,' cried Mrs. Bendixen, with a moan, then covering her face with her hands, she added, 'O, what do you want? why did you come here?'

'To save you from a worse fate even than that which has befallen me. Not that I care for you one straw; you are nothing to me, as he is nothing to me, and, so far as I am concerned, you might both of you have gone on your way unchecked and unwarned, but I do not choose to see this crime committed where I have the power of stopping it, and if it be stopped, Philip Vane will have his vanity to thank, and nothing else. That vanity is overweening; it led him to make public his conquest. He announced in the newspapers that he was engaged to be married to you, and thus I heard of it.'

'I don't see what there was to induce Mr. Vane to put it in the newspapers!' moaned Mrs. Bendixen.

'Don't you?' said Madge. 'I do. Your name, your position, and your attractions are well known in the world to which Philip Vane now belongs, and the fact of having secured them would tell undoubtedly in his favour. He meant to marry you as he had previously married me, for the sake of living upon you.

But his last marriage would have proved infinitely more successful than his first. You were something to win; your beauty is self-evident, your wealth and position generally acknowledged. When he married me, I was a poor actress in a country theatre, with sufficient good looks to win his eye, and a sufficient salary to keep him in tolerable comfort. They must have been poor enough, my appearance and my earnings, for when he had once possessed himself of both they had not enough attraction to induce him to acknowledge me as his wife, and so soon as he saw his way to effectually ridding himself, he deserted me: the ladder had served its purpose, he could afford to kick it down.'

'I am sure you judge Mr. Vane most unjustly,' said Mrs. Bendixen, raising her face from her hands. 'He is the most generous of men. His affection for me is quite disinterested, and it is too, too cruel to speak of him in this way.'

'When you have known him as long as I have known him, I will ask you for your ver-

dict on his character,' said Madge quietly; 'not that I expect that even then you would say of him what I say, for you would not have the cause.'

'You allow that,' cried Mrs. Bendixen; 'that shows that he was not entirely to blame.'

'It shows simply that you from your plenty can give him all he longs for, wealth, ease, luxury, the position in the eyes both of men and women to which he has aspired; while I from my poverty could only fend off hunger and cold, could only bar the door against the wolf, could only find the platform whence he should spring into competence, leaving me behind him. He deserted me because I could do so little, he will hold to you since you can do so much.'

'And he shall hold to me,' cried Mrs. Bendixen, springing to her feet; 'your last words have thoroughly determined me. See here, woman. I believe all you say. There is something in your voice, in your manner, which prevents my disbelieving it, much as I wish to do so. But I tell you I love Philip

Vane, love him with a fervour which you, with your pale puny passion, cannot for an instant imagine. He has become essential to my life, and I have never yet known what it was to have one aspiration checked, one wish thwarted. I have been married before, you know that. The man who took me from a boarding-school to be his wife gave me all that I then thought the world contained, power, riches, admiration. But it was not until after his death, it was not until I met Mr. Vane, that I knew the happiness of loving and being loved. Ah, do not take that happiness from me; do not, I implore you, dissipate that dream! You speak of yourself as one to whom the pleasures of life are at an end, but in your time you have enjoyed that greatest joy of all. Why then grudge it to me?'

'You are talking at random,' said Madge coldly, 'and I am unable to follow you. What influence can I have over your future beyond pointing out to you the impossibility of the course you propose to yourself to pursue? What would you wish me to do?'

'To go away, anywhere, in any country, to hide yourself, and never to come near me again. The good luck which has attended me throughout my lifetime has prevented your seeing Mr. Vane to-day. The dreadful secret which you have just uttered is known to us alone. It must never go farther, nay, more than that, he must never know that I am aware of its existence, never be reminded of it himself. I will buy it of you at what price you like. You have only to name the sum, and it is yours.'

'Supposing I were to do as you ask, how would your position be improved? You, with the gratified desires, and the unchecked wishes of which you have boasted, have purchased Philip Vane's love, or what is equivalent to it, and now wish to purchase my silence! Suppose I agree, how is your position improved? The world will believe you to be Philip Vane's wife, but you will know yourself—'

'Do you think I care what the world thinks of me or what I think of myself?' cried Mrs. Bendixen. 'I tell you I love this man, and

that I will not have him taken from me. Have you no understanding, have you no compassion?'

'I have no patience to listen to ravings which would be wearisome from a love-sick girl, but which are contemptible in a woman. I did not seek to be Philip Vane's judge, but fate seems to have appointed me to be his executioner. I have given you due warning, and I absolve myself if you choose to share his fate. Now let me pass. I will leave this place.'

And she rose and dropped her veil, and drew her mantle round her.

'Stay!' said Mrs. Bendixen. 'You must not leave in this manner. You have said that you care no longer for Philip Vane; that you regard him as dead to you; and yet you will not leave him to me! Ah, spare him, I implore you! I have looked forward so eagerly to the time when I should be his wife. I have reckoned so upon giving to him a love which no one hitherto has been able to evoke, that if he is torn from me I shall go mad. O, see me at your feet and spare me!'

As she uttered these words she dropped from her chair on to her knees, and lifted her hands in supplication. The large tears welled into her upturned eyes, and her hair, which had become unfastened, hung about her pale face.

'It is a pretty picture,' said Madge dreamily, looking down at the woman at her feet, 'and devotion such as this is certainly thrown away on its object. Come, madam!' she cried, 'rouse yourself, and let us put an end to this scene. You ask me to let your marriage with my husband take place without opposition; even if I would, I am powerless to do so. The secret is not mine alone, but is in the keeping of those who have a greater regard for my position than I have myself, and who are determined that it shall not be thus wantonly outraged.'

'You are implacable, then?' said Mrs. Bendixen, rising and throwing back her hair.

'I am merely indifferent,' said Madge coldly. 'As indifferent to your fate as to his. I came here to warn him of the consequences

of the act which he contemplated, and I found you in his place. In those consequences you are equally interested, and my warning has been given to you. My duty is done. Let me pass!'

'One moment yet,' cried Mrs. Bendixen. 'Will the fact that you have given this warning to me content you? Will you swear that you will seek no farther opportunity of letting him know your intentions towards him?'

'I see your meaning now,' said Madge, looking straight at her with cold unsparing eyes. 'Your passion for this man has so demented you, that you will hurry on this marriage, which will be no marriage, and accept yourself the position which you imputed to me at the commencement of our interview. Is not that so?'

'I do not deny it,' said Mrs. Bendixen excitedly. 'I have set my mind upon it, and I will carry it through. I should glory in—'

'You are mad!' interrupted Madge. 'Do you not see that if you were married to Philip Vane, and that marriage were proved

illegal, he would be a convicted felon? Or even suppose he evaded the law, his position would be lost, his power and prestige, all that makes life pleasant to him, gone for ever! You have romantic dreams, I suppose, of some sunny paradise, where you and he could live and love for ever. He would weary of you in a month, and when he found that you had been warned in time of the impending danger, and had neglected to inform him of it, he would kill you!'

'He might,' said Mrs. Bendixen, 'he might kill me then; at least I should have known his love.'

'And with that charming sentiment we will close the discussion,' said Madge, slightly shrugging her shoulders. 'Hear my last words, for we shall never meet again. The man for whom you are sacrificing yourself is treacherous and base, mean and cowardly. He has not even the one redeeming virtue of independence, but so soon as he gets the opportunity, will live on you as he lived on me, and as he abandoned me he will, should

it so suit his purpose, abandon you. I was young and inexperienced when I became his victim, you are a matured woman of the world, and have, besides, my example before you, and I warn you to profit by it. If you fall, it will be with your eyes open, and in defiance of the hands spread forth to hold you back. But you will fall, for you are a woman and infatuated!'

She turned the handle of the door as she uttered these last words, and let herself out. Mrs. Bendixen made a faint effort to detain her, but Madge drew her clinging dress more closely round her, and, with the faintest inclination of her head, passed by. The hall was empty now, as, she could see through the open door, was the dining-room. On the croquet-lawn a few players were idly knocking about the balls, and under the verandah, immediately outside the hall-door, some gentlemen were seated in lounging-chairs, smoking and drinking. One or two of them raised their hats as she passed by, and each of them honoured her with a hearty stare.

Madge passed steadily on, outwardly calm and grave, inwardly perturbed and excited.

'It is over,' she said to herself. 'I have discharged my duty, satisfied the promptings of my conscience, and obeyed the bidding of Mr. Drage. What has been gained by so doing is another matter; little enough, I should imagine. That woman, ignorant, unschooled, and impulsive, is madly in love, and will allow nothing to come between her and her object. Strange that I should have seen her, and that he—called away suddenly, she said he was, called away by telegram on important business. By telegram! that must have been the message, a copy of which Rose forwarded to me, and which I have here.'

She drew the paper from her pocket, opened it, and held it out before her. The addresses, both of sender and receiver, were plain and legible, but the rest of the text was in cipher, a hopeless mass of letters, jumbled together, and broken up into short impossible words.

'I feel certain that there is something of

importance herein,' said Madge. 'I cannot tell why, but I am certain of it. If I could only find a key to this cipher! I must, and I will.'

END OF BOOK THE SECOND.

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